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A Novelet by Sinclair Gluck

ARGOSY

JULY 10

WEEKLY

COUNTY FAIR

by Judson P. Philips

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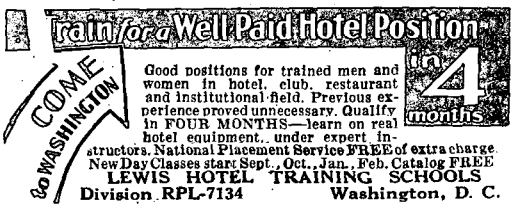
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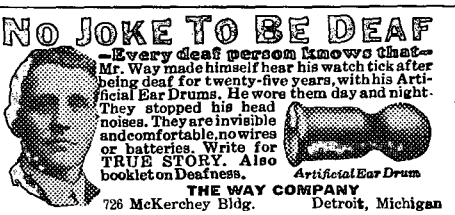
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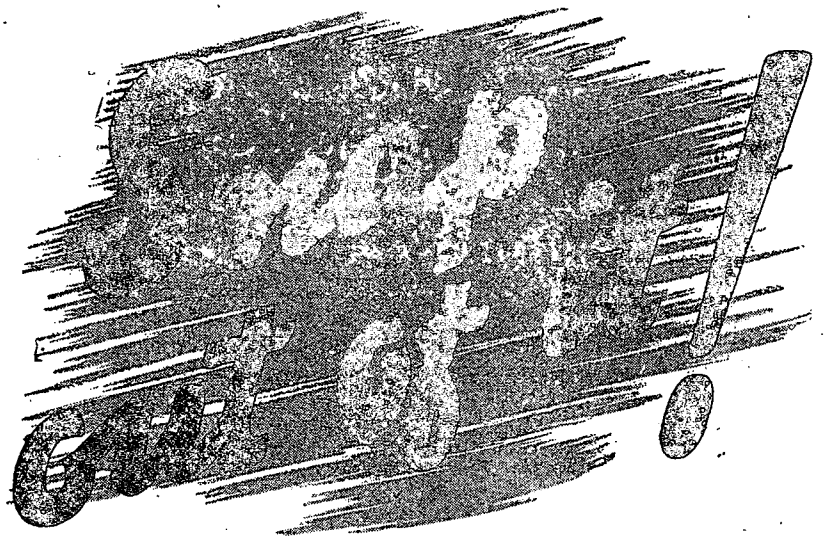

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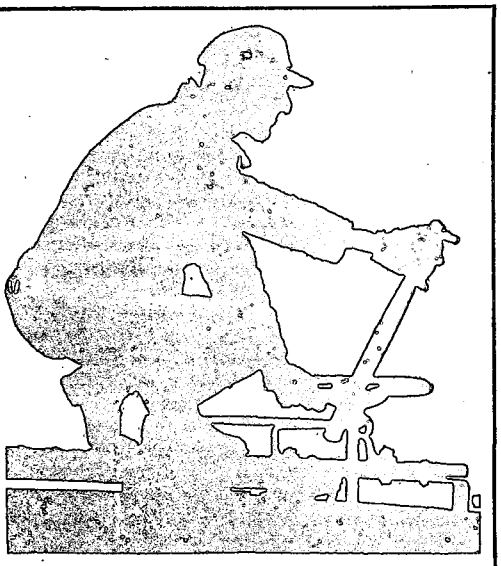

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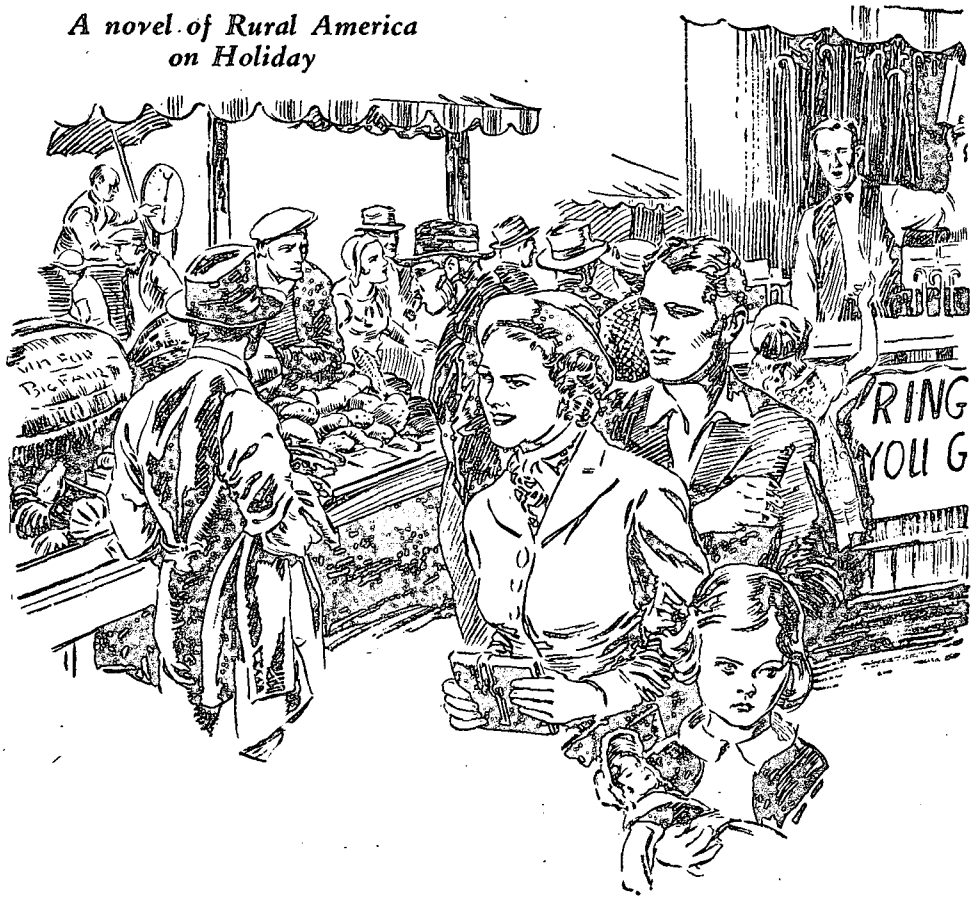

County Fair

By JUDSON P. PHILIPS

Author of "Grand National," "Tough Guy," etc.

CHAPTER I

A FANCY VEST

BRAD EVERTON pushed back his broad-brimmed hat and wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead with a bright red handkerchief. He was tall, lean, hard, and brown as a nut. In his blue eyes was a twinkle, half of amusement and half of pride.

"Well, Ben, what do you think of her?" he asked.

Ben Harder was as short as Brad was tall—a gnarled, weather-beaten man. The little creases at the corners of his mouth were stained with tobacco juice and, at this moment, he puckered his lips and spat expertly at a stone about six feet away, scoring a bull's-eye.

"All you need," he said, "is a caboose!"

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Brad Everton chuckled. "Mebbe you're right," he said. "Mebbe I'll get one and hire you out as brakeman."

They were talking about Brad Everton's outfit which he had just pulled up outside the main racing stable at the Dorchester Fair Grounds. To begin with there was a large horse van. Hitched to this was a trailer. Hitched to the trailer was a small, low-hung, racing car. Protruding through the roof of the trailer was a stovepipe, and from this pipe came a stream of smoke. It seemed to fascinate Ben Harder.

"You don't mean to say you got a fire goin' in there?" he said.

Brad chuckled again. "That there is Martha's idea," he said. "She figured if she was goin' to enter stuff in the cookin' and food exhibits she'd stand a better chance of winnin' if it was cooked fresh right on the grounds."

"Well I'll be a . . ." Ben's voice trailed off in real amazement. His eyes shifted to the racing car. An eager youth was working over the connection that attached it to the trailer. "What's that?"

"Racin' car," said Brad, and a faint frown brought tiny sharp lines between his eyes. "When Johnny heard there was to be one day of auto racin' he was bound to enter that contraption of his."

"That ain't Johnny!" Ben's voice was incredulous.

"None other," said Brad.

"Well—ain't he growed?" said Ben.

"He's eighteen," said Brad. "I was bigger than him at that age."

"It ain't possible," said Ben. "You ain't old enough to have a kid eighteen."

"Forty my last birthday," said Brad. He was stuffing tobacco into the bowl

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of his charred old briar pipe. His eyes looked across the fair grounds. "Everything's kind of painted up, ain't it, Ben?" he asked. His gaze rested for a moment on the men who were working frantically on what would be a glittering midway when the fair opened the next day. "Looks like things was goin' to be bigger and better."

Ben grunted something unintelligible. Ben had been in charge of the stables at the Dorchester Fair for longer than he liked to remember.

"Well," said Brad, "we might as well unload the horses, Ben. I got a mare in here I figure on enterin' in the five hundred dollar sweepstakes the last day. I got a hunch about her. I'd like to know what you think of her. Come on. Help me unhook this trailer so's we can lower the tailboard of the van and lead 'em out."

Ben cleared his throat unhappily and spat again. "Look, Brad, things is different this year, you know. The old Fair Committee ain't runnin' the show."

"I know," said Brad, unconcernedly. "Hired some sort of promoter fella, they say."

"That's right," said Ben, "and things ain't the same."

"Well, there's nothin' different about unloadin' horses," said Brad.

"Look, Brad," said Ben, in a miserable voice. "As a matter of fact there ain't any place in this barn for your horses."

Brad turned his head with a jerk. *"What!"*

"That's right, Brad. You didn't send in no reservations for your horses, and the places in this main barn is all took up."

Brad threw back his head and laughed. "You're kiddin'."

"No I ain't, Brad. This Riley, the promoter, is runnin' things different."

Brad looked sharply at Ben for a minute and seemed finally convinced that he wasn't being kidded. "I been stablin' my horses here for twenty years," he said. "They always saved a place for three of my horses. They knowed I'd tell 'em if I wasn't comin'."

"Things is different now," said Ben, mournfully.

Brad Everton's teeth were clamped very tight on the stem of his pipe. "Well, where am I goin' to stable 'em?" he asked.

"I been worryin' about you, Brad," said Ben, "knowin' you hadn't sent in no reservation fer barn space. But there wasn't nothin' I could do. But there's that old shed down to the south end of the track. It ain't bad, and there's a nice shade spot there fer your trailer, and a brook runnin' close by, and—"

"You mean there's no regular stable space left for me anywhere?" Brad asked, and the muscles rippled under the brown skin of his jaw. "Look, Ben, find this fella Riley for me. I want to have a talk with him. After twenty years—"

"It ain't goin' to be necessary to send for him on account of here he comes," said Ben.

SILK RILEY came across the paddock toward the barn. He was a young man, handsome in a dark, aquiline sort of way until you got a close look at his beady black eyes. The gray check suit he wore was just a trifle too gaudy, and so was the faun-colored waistcoat, the green necktie, and the green fedora. He carried a pale malacca walking stick and, as he approached, he waved it toward Brad's little caravan.

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"You'll have to get that junk out of here," he said. "There are some horse vans on their way into the grounds."

Brad stood perfectly still, eying the promoter. With a long forefinger he tamped down the tobacco in his pipe.

Ben spoke up, nervously. "Hi, Mr. Riley," he said. "Want you to meet Brad Everton. Brad's been winnin' horse racin', food exhibits, cattle exhibits, and every other kind of event at this fair for twenty years. Runs his farm off'n what he earns here every year." Ben cackled nervously.

"Well, you'll have to move this junk out of here, Everton," said Riley. He had a way of talking with a cigarette between his lips, and it bobbed up and down constantly. His eyes squinted to keep out the smoke.

"I been stablin' my horses in this barn fer a good many years, Mr. Riley," Brad drawled. "Ben tells me there ain't no place for me this year."

"Did you send in a reservation?" Riley asked, sharply.

"Nope. Didn't. Never did before."

"Well, things are being run differently this year, Mr. Everton. As a matter of fact, if you hope to enter your horses in the races you'll have to get to the judge's office before five o'clock. Entries close then."

"So I got to enter my horses, eh?"

"Certainly," snapped Riley.

"And you don't intend to do nothin' about findin' stable space for me?" Brad asked, softly.

"If you didn't send in reservations I can't do anything for you, Mr. Everton. And now if you'll move this junk of yours out of here—"

Brad struck a match and held it to the bowl of his pipe. When it was drawing properly he turned to Ben Harder, ignoring Riley. "You know, Ben, when I was out to the World's Fair in Chicago I run across a feller that wore a fancy vest just like that one of Riley's."

"Yeah?" said Ben, nervously.

"Yeah," drawled Brad. "That feller out in Chicago was a crook."

There was a moment of dead silence. A slow dull red began surging up Riley's neck, and the veins stood out. He took a step forward, his hand clenched tightly on the malacca stick.

Ben spat and missed the rock, a sign that he was suffering from a bad case of jitters. "Brad's a great kidder, Mr. Riley," he said, with a sickly grin.

"Yeah," said Brad, "I'm a great kidder, Mr. Riley." But his pale blue eyes were as frosty as a winter night as he looked calmly at the smouldering promoter.

CHAPTER II

FAIR FINANCE

"NOW Brad," said Martha Everton, "there ain't no cause for you to take on this way!" She was standing outside the trailer which had been drawn up in a clump of beautiful old maples. "It's cool here. If we'd been up to the old place we'd have been out in the broilin' sun all day with this trailer hotter than a roastin' oven. There's a fine brook for drinkin' and for the horses not twenty feet away. That barn may not be the fanciest one I ever see, but the roof don't leak, and the horses won't get all nerved up with people comin' in and out all the time."

Brad scraped at the bowl of his pipe with an old pen knife. "I like it fine here, Martha. It ain't that. It's the principle of the thing. For twenty years I've—"

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"Shucks," said Martha, "Riley's new, ain't he? How was he to know about us if we didn't let him know?"

"He should've found out," said Brad. He blew sharply through the stem of his pipe to clear it. "He should've found out who the old regulars was."

"Nonsense," said Martha. "Now don't go gettin' worked up over nothin', Brad Everton. We come here to have fun, the same as we always do. You and Johnny figure on winnin' a race or two, and maybe I can take some prizes myself. It looks to me like things have turned out pretty nice. Now you better go see Judge Hobbs and enter your horses before it's too late—and stop stewin'!"

The angry light faded out of Brad's blue eyes and he smiled at Martha. He reached out and very gently squeezed her hand. "I always say you got more horse sense than most horses, Martha."

"Get along with you," Martha said, with mock severity. "And I'll have some supper laid out fer you when you come back. I don't hold with you fillin' up on them frankfurters when you got to drive a couple of races tomorrow. You can ruin your stomach the last night, after you're through drivin'!"

JUDGE LEM HOBBS had been Chairman of the Dorchester County Fair Committee for forty years. The judge was short and fat and bald and he had a red face that he liked to think of as very jolly and friendly. Actually its expression was much more like a scared rabbit's. He was sitting in the office of the judges' stand at the track, sweating a lot because it was stifling hot, and there was a handkerchief stuck around the rim of his completely wilted collar.

It was just ten minutes to five when the office door opened and Brad Everton came in.

"Hi, Brad! Mighty glad to see you. Mighty glad!" boomed the judge.

"It's mutual, Lem," said Brad. He sat down in a chair opposite the judge's desk. "I understand I got to enter my horses officially for the races."

"That's right—that's right," said the judge. "And you're just in time. Entries close at five o'clock."

"Gettin' kind of finicky, ain't you, Judge, with formal entries and all that?" Brad drawled.

"Riley's idea," said the judge. "And I approve. Do things right if you're going to do them at all, he says. Make this a high class fair and it'll bring high class results."

"It done all right before," said Brad. "But I don't care, so long as I ain't too late. I'm enterin' three horses."

"Fine—fine! Only two days of trottin' you know. We're having auto races the second day. An innovation, but worth trying—well worth trying."

"Yeah. My kid's entering the race for amateurs."

"Fine. Has he made his entry? You'd better make it for him. But let's get to the horses."

"Well," drawled Brad, "I'm enterin' Old Phil in the 2:20 trot. He's won it six out of the last eight years and I figure he's got a good chance of takin' it again."

"Fine—fine. We know his record. No question about him."

"And I'm entering Volometer in the pace—first day."

"We know his record. No difficulty there," said the judge, writing on a big yellow pad.

Brad's eyes narrowed. "I got a new horse I aim to run in the five hundred dollar stakes on the fourth," he said. "Black mare named Dolly."

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"Record?" asked the judge, without looking up.

"She ain't got any record," said Brad, quietly, "at least not that I know of. I bought her off of a junk wagon in Rutland. I've been trainin' her myself, and she's ready to go."

The judge looked up and wiped the sweat from his face with his coat sleeve. "Gosh, Brad, I don't know about that," he said. "Riley doesn't want any horses in the championship stakes that haven't got records to prove their worth."

"You never had no requirements before for the championship, Judge." Brad's eyes had that cold, angry light in them again.

"Well, Riley wants things run right," said the judge. "He says he only wants horses of known class in the big stakes. Now if this mare had a record . . ."

"Ain't my word good enough, Judge?" Brad asked, dangerously quiet. "Have I ever run any dogs on this track, or held up any starts? I tell you she's ready. In fact I'm willin' to lay a little coin on her chances."

"Well, Riley says that—"

Brad brought his fist down suddenly, sharply, on the judge's desk. His voice was raised angrily. "To blazes with Riley!" he snapped. *"I've* got a record here, Judge—a record twenty years long. *I'm* tellin' you this horse is okay. Ain't that good enough?"

"Now, Brad—now, Brad!"

Brad smiled, a crooked little smile, and his voice was soft again. "I'm sorry I lost my temper, Judge, but I'm kind of fed up on hearin' about this Riley. You're one of the racin' judges. Won't you vouch for this mare of mine?"

"Well, it's against the rules, but—but . . ."

"I knew you would, Judge," said Brad, his smile broadening. "I guess it would be kind of bad for the Fair if a feller that's been comin' for twenty years couldn't have his word took."

"I'll see to it, Brad," said the judge.

But Brad made no motion to leave. "Tell me about this Riley," he said.

The judge spoke up eagerly. "He's a great fellow, Brad. Great fellow. Knows this game inside out. Been running fairs for years—years. You know we've never made any money out of this fair. Lost it often—too often! This year we've got a bigger and better fair than ever before and we haven't put up a cent. And we get forty percent of the profits!"

Brad looked up sharply. "Forty percent of the profits, eh? How are you gonna know how much the profit is?"

"Why, we know the cost of everything down to the last penny," said the judge. "Riley's set a fixed figure to cover the costs. Every cent we take in over that amount is split sixty-forty. If the expenses are more than Riley figured he has to pay 'em out of his sixty percent."

"And how do you know how much money is took in?" Brad asked.

The judge looked flustered. "Why—why, Riley checks the receipts at the end of each day. We'll know each day how much is taken in."

"Are you gonna have a man at the gate to check on Riley's ticket seller?"

"Why, no—not necessary. Riley's absolutely trustworthy."

"Are you gonna have a man in each of the midway booths to check on how much is took in?" Brad persisted.

"Certainly not. We simply check at the end of the day. Do you see anything wrong in that, Brad?"

Brad stood up. "You feel all right, Judge?" he asked, dryly.

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"Why—why certainly. I feel splendid—never better. Why do you ask?"

"Because," drawled Brad, "I figure that you and the committee act like you've kind of lost your grip."

CHAPTER III

A FARMER'S FIST

EVERYBODY in Dorchester knew Brad Everton, even though his farm was located seventy-five miles away in the town of Plymouth. Brad and Martha had been fixtures at the County Fair since the days when they were kids and had come with their respective fathers. When Brad left the judge's office he sauntered across the grounds toward the midway—or what would be the midway by tomorrow. There was a great clattering of hammers and much shouting of orders as counters were built, tent pegs driven, colored bunting tacked up. Tomorrow there would be food stands, gambling wheels, beano games, ring-tossing, ball-throwing, penny-pitching, shooting galleries, girl shows, wrestling bouts, fortune-telling. There was, of course, a merry-go-round, an airplane swing, and a miniature roller coaster. There was a huge, barrel-shaped tank around the inside of which some maniacs would ride motorcycles. All of these things were familiar to Brad, but as he sauntered along, sucking on his pipe, he was frowning. There was a lot about this that wasn't familiar. The same people had had the food and drink concessions at the Fair for years, but he saw none of the old faces as he watched the people at work on their booths. Walking down the midway the night before the Fair opened had always been like old home week before this. There'd be dozens of people who'd sing out a greeting to Brad and ask about the "missus" and whether he was betting any money on his own horses. But there was no one to talk to now.

It wasn't until he walked almost the whole length of the midway that he saw a familiar face. A little, gray-haired man with an OFFICIAL badge pinned to the lapel of his alpaca coat was standing in the center of the walk, watching the workers with a disconsolate face.

"Mort Graves, you old horse thief!" Brad cried, jovially.

Mort Graves turned, saw Brad, and his face lit up. The two men shook hands warmly. "Dang me, but it's good to see you, Brad!"

Brad grinned. "I'd just about decided that I'd got to the wrong fair grounds. Ain't seen a face I recognized till I got a load of you, Mort."

"Things is a lot different this year."

"Yeah," said Brad. "Well, the horses won't be much different, and I guess the same folks'll be exhibitin'. Mr. Riley can't change the population of Dorchester County, I guess. With you judgin' the cattle exhibits, Mort, and me winnin' the championship stakes on the Fourth, things'll be just about as usual." This was Brad's way of telling Mort he had a good thing in the big race.

But Mort didn't brighten as might have been expected. He scuffled his shoes in the dust and kept his eyes turned away. "I ain't judgin' the cattle exhibits this year," he said.

Brad took his pipe out of his mouth and stared at Mort in blank amazement. Mort had been judging the cattle exhibits for as long as Brad could remember, and everyone knew he was the best judge of cattle in the whole state of Vermont.

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"This feller Riley that's runnin' things," said Mort, "says he don't like havin' local judges. Says folks might think he'd show favoritism. So he's brung in a judge from clean outside the state. I guess mebbe he's right, although I ain't never allowed friendship t'influence me—so help me, Brad, I ain't."

Brad Everton felt an angry pulse beating in his temple. "I'd like to hear someone say that in front of me," he said, harshly. "By gosh, Mort, this feller Riley's sure steppin' high, wide, and handsome, ain't he?"

Mort smiled a little pathetically. "It'd sound like I was complainin' if I was to say so, Brad."

"Complainin'!" Brad snorted. It was all right refusing him stable space and insisting on entries and all that, but when you cut the heart right out of a fellow like Mort Graves, that was something else! Mort Graves lived from year to year for the Fair. Being cattle judge gave him prestige, and he was proud of his position. New fangled ways were all right, but it was taking all the fun out of the Fair if the old timers were going to be shoved into the background.

"Well, I ain't complainin', Brad," said Mort, earnestly. "I wouldn't want you to think so. They've gone and made me some kind of official. 'Tain't like I'd been kicked out entirely."

"Official, eh?" said Brad.

"Yeah. I just kind of wander around and if anyone has any complaints I try to take care of 'em."

Brad was angry. "And I suppose if somebody wants to know where the washroom is you got to escort 'em there, huh?" His teeth clamped hard on the stem of his pipe. "Judge Hobbs and the rest of the committee stood for them lettin' you out, huh?"

Mort scuffed at the dust some more. "Well, they ain't got much to say about things this year. They've turned the whole show over to Riley."

Brad was scowling. "Well, it's a cryin' shame, that's all I got to say." He dropped a hand on Mort's shoulder. "If you get tired standin' around here doin' nothin', come on over to my trailer for a bite of supper. I guess Martha figgered I'd bring somebody along with me. We're campin' in that maple grove down to the south end of the track. Come over in about a half hour, Mort."

"Gosh, I'd like nothin' better, Brad. To sample a bit of Martha's cookin', and maybe talk over old times a bit."

BRAD strode away, his teeth gripping fiercely on the pipestem. Old Ben Harder had been right. Brad didn't look his forty years, and as he walked along now, his face clouded, he looked like a big, overgrown kid. His heavy brown fists were tightly clenched at his sides, and his jaw had a truculent jut to it. Down at the end of the midway was a low sprawling building in which the cooking and vegetable exhibits were held. Brad headed for this, bent on having a word with Myrtle Goodman who was always in charge—just to tell her that Martha was here and would have some things to exhibit. But as he approached the building Brad already had a sense of misgiving. Everybody else had been changed or fired. Probably Myrtle had suffered the same fate.

But the first person he saw when he entered the building was Myrtle Goodman, and he felt better.

"Brad Everton!" she cried. "Land sakes but I'm glad to see you. Martha with you?"

"Yep," said Brad, cheerily. "Just

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thought I'd drop in to tell you she'll have some stuff for your exhibit tomorrow mornin'."

Mrs. Goodman twisted her apron between her fingers. "I'm not runnin' the exhibit this year, Brad," she said, nervously. "I'm just an exhibitor, like Martha." And then she looked anxiously at Brad. "I suppose Martha notified 'em she was goin' to exhibit?"

"No, she didn't," said Brad, slowly. "Why?"

Mrs. Goodman looked unhappy. "They got a whole lot of new rules this year, Brad. I—I don't know if—"

Mrs. Goodman turned and indicated a hard-faced young girl who had on more lipstick than Brad had ever seen in Dorchester. "Miss Gerstein!" Mrs. Goodman called. The girl came over. "This is Mr. Everton. His wife has always exhibited here, but she didn't get around to filin' an entry. I was wonderin', since they didn't know . . ."

"I'm sorry," said Miss Gerstein, who had a voice as unemotional as a telephone operator's. "If Mrs. Everton didn't file an entry it's too late now."

Brad could feel something boiling and seething inside him. Not let Martha exhibit, eh? Somehow he kept his voice quite steady. He pointed to a long wooden stand on which foodstuffs would be placed the next day. "Is this the stand on which my wife won't be allowed to exhibit her bread and pies?" he asked, very softly.

Miss Gerstein nodded. "If that's all I can do for you, Mr. Everton—"

"It ain't," said Brad. "You can start yellin' for help!"

And then Brad Everton went into action. One fierce kick of a hobnailed boot demolished one leg of the stand. In about thirty seconds the whole thing had collapsed. While Miss Gerstein went to the door and shrieked bloody murder, Brad proceeded methodically to reduce the stand to kindling wood. He had just about finished the job when a huge, broad-shouldered man with a crooked nose and a cauliflower ear came running through the door.

"Hey, you!" he shouted at Brad. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Get him out of here!" Miss Gerstein shouted hysterically. "He's drunk."

Punk Hogan was Riley's strong arm chief, and he knew just how to handle cases of this sort. He caught Brad by the right arm and gave a savage twist which was calculated to bring Brad to his knees. Something went wrong, however, because though Hogan twisted sharply and scientifically, Brad's arm stayed just where it had been—rigid as a steel beam. Brad looked at Hogan, almost pityingly.

"If you've got any notion of walkin' out of here on your two feet," said Brad, quietly, "I'd let go of that arm."

Hogan let go, and then shifted his feet. He was a boxer and he was getting set for what he felt certain was coming. But Brad stood perfectly quiet, eyeing Hogan with a sort of detached curiosity.

"You can't get away with breakin' up the joint," snarled Hogan. "I'm takin' you to Riley!"

"I guess it'd be a mite more accurate to say I'm goin' with you to see Riley," Brad drawled. "I'm goin' with you because I want to see him—not because you want to take me."

"Come on!" snapped Hogan, and he reached for Brad's arm again.

"I'd still keep my hand off of that arm if I was you," said Brad, and his cold blue eyes looked hard into Hogan's shifty green ones. He turned to Mrs. Goodman. "So long, Myrtle," he said, casually.

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BRAD and Hogan walked across the fair grounds to the little building which housed Riley's office. Hogan kept his hands strictly off Brad until they reached the office door, at which point he grabbed Brad's arm so that it looked as if he was bringing him in. Riley was sitting behind a flat-topped desk, cigarette between his thin lips, his green hat pushed back on his head.

"This monkey goes into the exhibits' building," Hogan said, "and goes haywire. He busts up the main stand and nobody knows what else he'd have done if Gerstein hadn't hollered for me. I brought him over."

"That's a lie," said Brad coolly.

"You mean you didn't break up the stand?" Riley demanded, sharply.

"I mean your friend didn't bring me," said Brad. "I come of my own accord." And then quite unexpectedly he turned to Hogan who was gripping his arm and said, almost sorrowfully, "I told you not to hang onto that arm."

Quick as a striking snake Brad's left fist shot out and caught Hogan squarely on the point of the chin. Hogan catapulted across the room, bounced off the wall, and then sank very slowly to the floor. Brad turned calmly to Riley, who had risen abruptly. "Now mebbe we can talk better," he said.

"Everton, I'm not standing for any rowdyism on these grounds!" Riley snarled. There were two little white spots at the corners of his nostrils. "You've been drinking!"

"I ain't ever touched a drop of liquor in my life," said Brad, quietly. "Well, that ain't exactly true. I tried a glass of cherry brandy once—and I didn't like it. I ain't drunk, Riley, but I'm kind of het up."

"You'll behave yourself around here and you'll pay for the damage you've done, or I'll have the troopers throw you and your outfit off the grounds," said Riley, his beady little eyes glittering with fury.

"Maybe you will and maybe you won't," said Brad. "The troopers is all friends of mine. You see, I'm the head selectman up to Plymouth where I come from. But that ain't what I come to tell you. You're runnin' this Fair, Riley, and up to a certain point you got a right to run it the way you please. But the people of this county supports the Fair and they expect a square deal. I didn't kick when there wasn't the usual stable space for my horses. There was a place to put 'em, and they're entered in the races. But my wife's been exhibitin' in the cookin' show for twenty years. She's goin' to exhibit this year, entry or no entry. Now you can be nice about it if you choose, or you can be nasty. And the way I act will depend on the way you act."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"Well, sir," Brad drawled, "I guess just about everybody who'll come to this Fair in the next three days knows me or has heard about me. If I was to let on that my wife or any other of the old-timers wasn't gettin' a square deal the crowd might not like it."

The smoke curled up from Riley's cigarette in a steady spiral. He met Brad's cold stare and his own eyes didn't waver. Silk Riley was wondering just how much trouble Brad Everton could really make. Very slowly he reached up, took the cigarette from between his lips, and smiled.

"I guess we can smooth things out, Mr. Everton," he said. "Maybe we were both a bit hasty. You and your wife should have abided by the rules,

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but since this is the first year they've been in effect I guess we can stretch a point. I'll see to it that your wife is permitted to exhibit. But another year you'll know the rules and abide by them, I trust."

Brad looked at Riley mildly. "You figgerin' on runnin' this Fair another year?"

"Why not?" asked Riley, almost jovially. "I think it's going to be a big success for everyone."

"I guess there ain't no doubt about its bein' a success for you," Brad drawled. "But I been figgerin' that when it was all over the committee might wake up to find out they didn't even have their gold fillin's left."

All the good humor faded out of Riley's face and left it an angry red.

"Look here, Everton, that's the second time you've suggested that I'm not on the up and up."

"Mebbe it won't be the last," said Brad, coolly, and walked out.

Riley came swiftly around from his desk and yanked Punk Hogan to his feet. The ex-pug's knees were still wobbly. "Where's that yokel?" he demanded thickly. "I'll fix him! I'll—"

"Shut up," snarled Riley. "You'll do nothing to him. Nothing except keep an eye on him. He's got too many friends around here for us to beat up on him without raising a stink. But he's looking for trouble. If he gets too nosey let me know. I guess we can take care of him in a pinch." And Riley's lips twisted in a one-sided smile.

CHAPTER IV

SOMETHING UNFAIR

COUNTY FAIR.

As early as six o'clock the next morning the first of a long stream of customers began to appear outside the Fair Grounds. The ticket booth at the main entrance didn't open until eight, but already there was a motley assortment of old cars, loaded down with every member of the family from the grandfather to the babies. Buggies drawn by scraggly horses brought farmers from the hills, people who made their one annual excursion into the town at fair time. They came prepared to spend the day at least, and many of them would stick out the three day stretch. A few horse vans bringing in the last of the trotters for the racing appeared early. A few cattle being driven along the dusty roads by bare foot kids ambled toward the pens where the cattle exhibits would be held.

County Fair!

This is the one time of the year when a little money is spent frivolously; the one time of the year when old friends meet to eat and drink and laugh together and throw rings at kewpie dolls; the one time of the year when the backwoods farmers have a chance to see exhibits of modern farm machinery and count their pennies in the hope that they can squeeze out enough for some new implement or machine; the one time when the problems of crop raising and fruit growing are discussed with neighbors.

County Fair!

This is the time when the greatest of all sports is on display. Trotting races. Every farmer in Vermont is a trotting race enthusiast. He knows the records of all the local horses. He has probably owned a promising horse at some time . . . driven him, trained him. He is an expert in all phases of the game. Oh, he views the girl shows with embarrassed amusement, he likes to swing the hammer on the weight ma-

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chine to test his strength and win a bad cigar, he likes to look at the livestock and have his fortune told, to fill his stomach with food he wouldn't consider fit to eat if it was served on his own table, he likes to risk a dime on the spinning wheels in the hope of collecting a half on his bet. But he really comes to watch the races. The stands and all the parking spaces around the track rail are filled long before the first race of the day. Score card and pencil vendors do a rushing business. Horses! They are the story of the County Fair. They are the magic lure that brings the farmer away from his work to spend his money on an endless variety of cheap and worthless goods and amusements.

LONG before the first of the customers appeared outside the gate Brad Everton was up and doing. He had finished his breakfast at four; so had Johnny, his son. Johnny Everton was a gangling counterpart of his father. He had the same clear blue eyes, the same powerful frame. He had the same firm, assured mouth that was Brad's, and he spoke in much the same soft, drawling voice. But Johnny belonged to a different age. Johnny talked machinery from morning till night. He pored over technical books about airplanes and racing cars. He was constantly urging Brad to do away with some of his work horses on the farm and supplant them with tractors.

"Listen," Brad told him, "I ain't never heard that it was a sin to have fun when you're workin'. It wouldn't be no fun to me to have the sound of an engine hammerin' in my eardrums all day. And gosh, Johnny, I couldn't *talk* to a tractor! I've got so used to tellin' my team all my troubles, and just what I think about my neighbors, and expectin' that they understand me that I'd be lost without 'em. Besides people'd think I was crazy if they heard me talkin' to a tractor!"

But Brad had never curbed Johnny's mechanical bent. He had turned over an old corn crib to Johnny which the youngster had made into a machine shop. There he'd built his racing car. Secretly Brad was in a panic at the notion of Johnny driving in the auto races next day. He'd seen the look of downright terror in Martha's eyes whenever Johnny talked about it. But neither of them had said anything about it. Johnny worked hard on the farm. He'd already graduated from high school. If he wanted to race autos Brad felt it was his business.

But this morning Johnny forgot about his precious car to help Brad prepare the horses for the day's racing. Old Phil, a bay gelding of indeterminate age, was to go in the 2:20 trot. Volometer was to go in the pace—Volometer, black, nervous, with scarlet-lined nostrils and bulging veins that showed through his glossy skin. Old Phil raced just once a year at the County Fair. Brad spent the month of June every year getting him in shape. The rest of the time Old Phil had the run of the farm. Volometer was young and as good a pacer as there was in the state, and Brad took him to Rutland and Cambridge and Glens Falls and Brattleboro every summer. Both of them would run today because of the curtailed trotting program, which meant that Brad would have to drive six heats at least that afternoon, a grueling prospect. Dolly, the new horse, was a red roan mare with a quizzical eye. Brad had bought her off a junk wagon as he'd told Judge Hobbs. She'd had racing experience before—Brad knew from the way she

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handled. He'd been working with her for two months, and deep down in his heart he felt a thrill whenever he looked at her. She was all horse! And she could trot like the wind. In all his years Brad had never won the championship stakes on the Fourth of July, although he'd come close once or twice. The little red roan mare was his first real hope.

"She didn't get the least bit excited with the truckin', Pop," Johnny said. He was rubbing Old Phil with an onion sack, and the bay's coat shone like a mirror.

"No, she didn't get excited," said Brad, who was polishing harness. "And she won't get excited in the big race. She'll just trot! She's a trottin' fool, Johnny."

"You said it, Pop!" said Johnny, enthusiastically. "Say, wouldn't it be great if you won all three races and I won the auto race? That'd be five hundred dollars for me, and pretty near a thousand for you. That'd be worth somethin', huh?"

Brad frowned and rubbed Old Phil's bit vigorously. "Johnny, I ain't exactly satisfied with the way things line up here this year. I want you to keep your eyes and ears open, son."

Johnny looked up, curiously. "What do you mean, Pop?"

"THIS Riley," said Brad. "He's runnin' this Fair to make a killin' for himself, you can bank on that. I had a little talk with Ben Harder after supper last night. There's some mighty fine-lookin' horses in the main barn—horses that ain't never run here before. And they're owned by funny people, Johnny."

"Funny people? I don't get you, Pop."

"You know Bill Watrous down Arlington way? Got a run-down farm, ain't ever been caught up on his taxes in his life, always in debt to the bank and borrowin' from his friends? Well, he's got a horse and rig over there that looks like a million bucks."

"I don't get it, Pop," said Johnny.

"I don't neither, son. Bill Watrous never could of scraped up the cash to buy that horse and rig. Now suppose that horse belongs to Riley. I ain't sayin' he does. I'm sayin' just supposin'. Suppose he gives Bill Watrous mebbe twenty-five bucks to let him run the horse in Bill's name. And supposin' that horse wins the championship stakes?"

"I still don't get it," said Johnny.

"And I paid good money to educate you," sighed Brad. "There's a five hundred dollar prize for the winner of the championship stake, son. If that horse that's supposed to belong to Bill Watrous really belongs to Riley, then Riley won't have to pay out five hundred if the horse wins. He'll only be out the twenty-five he give Bill for the use of his name."

"But, Pop!" Johnny said, his eyes wide. "That'd be crooked."

"Which is Riley's middle name," drawled Brad. "There's other horses here entered in the other races that look just as phony. That's why I say keep your eyes and ears open. There's five hundred up for the main auto race that you're entered in, son. Maybe Riley won't want to lose that either."

"I'll stack my car up against anything they can put on these dirt tracks," said Johnny, proudly. "You can't go only so fast on this kind of a track. It's drivin' that counts."

"Yeah," said Brad, "and I ain't saying you can't drive like a fool, son. But if Riley don't want you to win . . ." Brad's eyes had a look of deep anxiety in them. "All I say is, keep your eyes

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and ears open. Keep 'em *wide* open."

"You just bet I will, Pop."

Brad sighed. "And now I want to give these two horses a little workout before the sun comes up hot. Phil first. And you get Volo ready while I'm workin' him."

"But, Pop," Johnny said, "if you can prove all this . . ."

"I can't prove it—not yet, son. But I aim to, if I can. And we gotta be careful, because Riley ain't goin' to like it if he thinks I've got wind of what he's up to."

CHAPTER V

RINGERS TROT HOME

BRAD worked his two horses, and while he worked he did some serious thinking. In the case of Old Phil, Brad just jogged him around the track a couple of miles, his own feet hanging out of the foot braces of the sulky. Brad had heard whispers around the fair grounds the night before that had set him wondering; whispering about this horse of Bill Watrous's; whispering about a couple of other pretty good-looking horses that belonged to men who didn't figure to own that kind of stock. None of these men were driving their own horses in the races. Not that there was anything queer about that. There were always professional drivers at the Fair, and many owners preferred to have their horses handled by the professionals. But the catch was that three of the horses that were being eyed with suspicion were to be driven by a professional named Saunders who was new to the Dorchester Fair.

Brad began to do some figuring. The story was that Riley promoted fairs all over the country, winter and summer. Suppose he had a few good horses, horses that were better than the county fair run of horses, and a couple of good auto race drivers—and maybe a few head of good show cattle? Some places he'd be able to enter the horses and the rest legitimately. In places like Dorchester where only owners within the county were permitted to compete he'd have to sneak 'em in. But straight or crooked Riley'd save himself several thousand dollars in prize money at each fair.

Brad brought Old Phil into the stable and Johnny went to work on him, rubbing his legs. On race days Brad fed his horses light and often. They'd had hay and grain at four-thirty, when he got up. They'd have another light feeding of grain about nine and still another at twelve. By the time the races began at one-thirty they'd be set. Brad's workout with Volometer was more serious than the one with Old Phil. The black pacer was too high-strung to take things quietly. Brad worked him for about a mile and half, letting him take the turns at top speed.

When he'd finished Brad went back to the trailer and took a nap. It was about ten o'clock when he finally got up again and wandered out to the fair grounds. Things were going full blast now. There was a big crowd—a bigger crowd than usual for the first day. The cattle judging, the cooking and fruit and vegetable judging, were all done in the morning.

Brad sauntered over to the pens where the cattle were shown. There was quite a crowd there, and when Brad arrived there were two bulls out in the ring. A pompous, elderly gentleman in a frock coat with a wide expanse of gray waistcoat was in the ring, doing the judging. Brad saw Mort Graves over by the rail and

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joined him. Mort was eying the two bulls keenly. Brad, who wasn't an expert but who knew cattle as any farmer does, saw instantly that one of the bulls was far superior to the other.

"Any doubt about which one is the best, Mort?" he asked.

"That's what puzzles me," said Mort Graves, scowling. "That black feller is the finest specimen I've seen in ten years, but this judge has been hesitatin' over 'em fer about ten minutes."

"Who owns the black one?"

"Jack Sherrick, up Rupert way."

Brad frowned. Sherrick! He knew him as a good for nothing alcoholic who lived in a tumble-down shack up the mountain. Sherrick had never owned a head of livestock that good in his life.

At that moment the judge indicated the black bull with a flourish and that contest was over.

"Of course he was right," said Mort Graves, "but the Lord only knows what took him so long."

"Mebbe I could tell you," said Brad, darkly. "But it'd be a long story. That was the big money prize, wasn't it?"

Mort nodded. Brad's smile was grim. Riley's judge . . . Riley's bull . . . and they tried to make it look good by having the decision look tough. Brad turned away and at just that minute he saw Jack Sherrick, tall, stoop-shouldered, unshaven, with restless, rheumy eyes.

"Hi, Jack. Congratulations."

Sherrick wiped his nose with a ragged coat sleeve. "Hi, Mr. Everton."

"Fine-lookin' bull you have there. Where'd you get him?"

"Bought him," said Sherrick, avoiding Brad's level stare.

"Where?" Brad asked, innocently. "I'd like to get hold of somethin' like that for myself."

Sherrick shuffled his feet. "Matter of fact I didn't buy him, Mr. Everton. I traded a team for him."

Brad laughed good-naturedly. "The only team of yours I ever see, you could hang your hat on 'em in about six places."

"It weren't that team I traded," said Sherrick, and with that he faded away into the crowd.

Brad watched him go, rubbing his chin reflectively. "Yes, Mort," he said, "I guess I know why it took that judge so long—me and the Lord!"

Mort laughed. "Well, I can see I ain't goin' to get it out of you till you're good an' ready. I'm goin' around and see if I can't get some money down on Old Phil in the trot and that black horse of yours in the pace—what's his name?"

"Volometer," said Brad. "But don't lay any money on either of 'em, Mort, because they ain't goin' to win."

Mort looked at his friend, astonished. "Ain't they in shape?"

"They was never in better shape in their life," said Brad. "But they ain't goin' to win."

"But, Brad . . .!"

"I'm givin' you a hot tip," said Brad.

MARTHA was really quite a good sport about losing the bread-baking contest. She had won it for five years running and it was about time, she said, that somebody else won it. But all the same Brad knew she was disappointed.

"Did you think you lost fair and square, Martha?" he asked, over his lunch.

Martha frowned. "Well, Brad honey, just between you and me, I figured I had Mrs. Munson beat all hollow. Mine was a better lookin' loaf—and better tastin', which is more to the point. And

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I thought it was lighter and had a better texture."

"Outside of that you figured she won, huh?" Brad grinned. He reached out and covered Martha's hand with his. "I guess you'll sort of have to lay that lickin' to me, honey. I don't guess Mr. Riley's judges would give any prize to an Everton after me bustin' up the place on him last night. I'm sorry about that, but I was kinda peeved there for a while."

"It don't matter, Brad, honestly. And Mrs. Munson needs the ten dollars a whole lot worse than we do—or ever will, I hope. Besides, you and Johnny are gonna win enough prize money fer one family."

"I wouldn't count on it, Martha," said Brad. He hadn't told Martha yet about his suspicions. He hadn't told her for the very good reason that he didn't want her worrying about Johnny the next day. You could get beat in a trotting race by a better horse and that was that. But Johnny was one roaring fool of an auto race driver, and if they were going to beat him they might have to get tough about it. Brad was worried sick. His one hope was that he could get some evidence against Riley, and use it to safeguard Johnny on the next day.

"I guess I don't have to worry much," said Martha. "Everyone knows you're as good a driver as there is, professionals included. And Old Phil and Volometer are as good as have ever come to Dorchester."

Brad patted her hand. "Up to now, honey," he said. "But there's some hot horses here this year. A fellow named Benson that just bought a farm down Sutherland way has horses in each of my races today and they look very good to Ben Harder. You gotta remember, honey, there's horses to be had down to Goshen and other trottin' centers that is way out of our class. Maybe we're up against somethin' like that."

"Well, you can't do better than your best," said Martha.

"If you're goin' to see any of it from the grandstand," said Brad, "you'd better get over there pretty quick. It was fillin' up fast an hour ago."

IT was about a quarter past one when Brad brought Old Phil out onto the track to warm up for the first heat of the 2:20 trot. Every seat in the covered grandstand was taken and in the bleachers, too, and cars lined the rail all the way round the half-mile track.

Other entrants were already out on the track being warmed up. Old Phil needed very little trotting to get himself ready. As Brad jogged him along past the grandstand there was a great round of applause, and many old timers shouted greetings to Brad, and to his mount. The old bay horse had won many races at the fair and applause was no novelty to him. He turned his head to look at the clapping, waving crowd with mild curiosity.

Brad was looking for Saunders who was driving Benson's horse in this race, and presently he spotted him. Saunders wore a green silk shirt and dark green goggles. The horse was a fine-looking gray gelding listed under the name of Time Clock. He seemed without nerves as Saunders trotted him hard for the first turn, pulled up easily when he got the signal, and turned and came back, cool as Old Phil himself. Brad's lips tightened and he reached up to adjust his own goggles. As he came back past the starter's stand the starter called out:

"You're number two in the first tier, Mr. Everton."

Brad nodded and continued down the

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track. He was looking for Ben Harder and presently he spotted him standing near the judges' stand in the infield. Ben caught his eye and gave a little signal with his hand. Ben had instructions from Brad to time Old Phil in this heat, no matter where he finished.

"All right . . . all right!" the starter's voice came through his megaphone. "Take 'em down the track, gentlemen. Let's get this one the first time. Easy now . . . easy. Don't turn that pole horse too soon. Take him down farther —*farther!*"

Dick Grafton's big sorrel colt was the pole horse and he was fighting to turn. Brad watched him closely. Old Phil was a stoic when it came to starts. He never wasted energy with fretting. He did exactly what Brad asked of him. Brad turned with the pole horse and they started up the track.

"Easy! Easy!" the starter bawled. "Let that pole horse come up! *Let him come up!*" And then the bell clanged.

Merritt Camp, driving his own black speedster in the outside lane, had beaten the field past the starting line by a full length and the sorrel on the pole had broken.

Old Phil quit with the clanging of the bell, but most of the rest of them went clear to the first turn before their drivers could pull them up and swing around. Slowly they all came back to try again.

"Keep that horse back, Mr. Camp!" the starter shouted. "And get that pole horse up faster, Grafton—a lot faster."

Once more they moved slowly down the track. Saunders and the gray were moving quietly and easily. Brad kept his eye on Grafton and turned with him, and once more they started up.

"Easy on the outside. *Easy!*" the starter pleaded. It was better this time, much better. *"Go!"*

WITH a thunder of hoofs nine horses swept past the stand to a roar of excitement from the crowd. There was no strategy to driving Old Phil. The aged bay knew the game inside out and he set his own pace from the start and maintained it without variation to the finish. They said around the county that he was a tough horse to beat because he never broke and he always got away in the clear from the barrier. Brad rounded the first turn in the lead and swung over the pole as Grafton's sorrel began to run and had to be pulled down. Brad gave his cap a little tug and relaxed on his seat. As he turned into the back stretch he glanced over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of Saunders and Time Clock trotting fifth. Merritt Camp's black was coming up fast on the outside, eyes white-rimmed, nostrils flaring. Up to Brad's shoulder, up to Phil's tail, his withers—and then the black broke. If Old Phil was aware of competition he didn't show it. He just trotted on, hard and square. Brad knew the old bay was at his very best. As they rounded the south turn and came down the home stretch for the first lap he glanced back and saw that the gray had moved up to fourth.

Past the grandstand they went. Camp had got the black under control and he was challenging again. And, again, just as he was moving up on Phil, he broke, this time badly, hopelessly, so that the whole field had dusted past him before Camp could get him trotting again. This moved Time Clock up to third. Brad got another glimpse of him as they went into the back stretch for the second time, and he saw Saunders pull him out to the side.

"Now it's coming!" Brad thought, and his lips tightened.

There was no use in trying to hurry

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Old Phil, because he was giving all he had. From the distant roar of the crowd Brad knew that the gray was coming up fast. Before they reached the home turn the gray's head had come alongside Brad. Benson's horse wore no blinders, and Brad saw his eyes, calm, unexcited, when he went past Phil as if the old bay had been walking. Though a dark anger was boiling inside Brad he couldn't help feeling a thrill of admiration as the magnificent gray thundered ahead.

That was all there was to the race. Time Clock beat Old Phil to the wire by a good six lengths, and as Brad put it afterwards to Ben Harder, "Saunders was breakin' his back trying to keep it from lookin' worse."

Old Phil was shaking his head angrily when Brad finally turned him and brought him back past the stands. Old Phil didn't like to be beaten. He had given everything he had in the stretch drive and had finished second about five lengths ahead of Grafton's sorrel. Yet Time Clock had made him look bad. Johnny came running out from the infield with a cooler which he threw over Phil after he had undone the check-rein.

"Tough luck, Pop!" he said to Brad who climbed out of the sulky wiping the dust and sweat from his face.

"Weren't no luck to it, son," said Brad. "Phil trotted a fine heat. He just got beat, that's all."

"Maybe he'll do better the second heat," Johnny said, consolingly.

"He can't do no better," said Brad. He walked over toward the infield to find Ben Harder. Before he located Ben the announcement came from the judges' stand.

"Result of the first heat of the 2:20 trot. Time Clock, number six, was one. Number two was two. Number seven was three. Number one was four. Time of the heat, 2:22."

Brad frowned. And just then Ben Harder, his eyes popping, grabbed Brad's arm. "Did you hear that?" he said, excitedly. "Why daggone it, Brad, I timed old Phil in 2:18. That other horse was seconds better! They're phonyin' up the time—jest to make it look good."

"Yeah," said Brad. "Jest keep in your mind what the real time was, Ben. It may come in handy."

IT was a bad day's racing for Brad Everton. The two other heats of the 2:20 trot were almost duplicates of the first. Old Phil was at his best but he was no match for Time Clock.

The pace was again furious. Saunders, presumably driving another Benson horse, was again the winner, but only after a tussle that left the crowd weak with excitement. The Saunders' horse was a fast-stepping chestnut, good enough to win handily in most county fair races. But Brad's Volometer had reached his peak for this race. In three heartbreaking heats the chestnut just nosed out Volometer for the money. Volometer actually won the first heat. Saunders pursued the same tactics as in the trot and held his horse back until the last quarter. But he had underestimated Volometer's staying power, and Brad's flashy black had more than enough to stand off the chestnut's finish drive.

In the next two heats, Saunders realizing that he had a real race on his hands, dogged Volometer from the start, and the chestnut was just good enough to beat the black on even terms. Brad was disappointed, because after that first heat he had dreamed of beating Riley's horse—for he was convinced that it was Riley's. But he knew

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both Phil and Volometer had done the best day's racing of their careers.

Ben Harder came around to Brad's barn after the racing was over, and found Brad still cooling out Volometer. Brad was walking the black gently up and down in the maple grove, a cooler pinned up around Volometer's neck. There was a look of something almost like indignation in Volometer's eyes, and from time to time he gave vent to a little snort of disgust.

"He knows he got beat," said Ben. He jammed his hands into his pockets.

"Yeah, he knows," said Brad.

Ben spat angrily. "Ringers!" he said.

"Yeah," said Brad, his lips drawn tight. "And it looks like my little red mare is gonna get beat on the Fourth of July, too." He kicked at a tuft of earth with his shoe. "I had my heart kind of set on winnin' that, Ben. She's a wonder, that mare."

"I'd laugh if she beat Riley's horse anyhow!" said Ben.

"It's askin' too much, Ben. It's askin' too damned much of her," said Brad. "She's the best trotter I ever owned, but she ain't a big time horse." He sighed. "I've been waitin' twenty years to win this championship, and I thought this was gonna be the time." Then his face hardened. "But that ain't the worst of it, Ben. I'm worried about Johnny. They'll lay for him in the auto races tomorrow, just the way they laid for me today. Only it's serious in auto racin', because there's just one way to stop Johnny!"

"Can't you explain things to the kid and get him to pull out?"

"It'd only get his dander up," said Brad. He looked at Ben with a wry smile. "You nor I wouldn't quit if we was in his shoes, Ben. It ain't reasonable t'expect him to, is it?"

"Nope," Ben admitted, laconically.

"If we can get the proof that Riley's playin' crooked, it might help to safeguard the kid."

"We'll get it," said Ben Harder. "We got to get it, so's you and Johnny will both have your chance to win."

CHAPTER VI

THE L'AMOUR INTEREST

JOHNNY EVERTON hadn't seen much of the Fair, what with spending every spare moment he had tuning up his motor, and helping Brad all that first afternoon with Old Phil and Volometer. But that night after supper he set out by himself to have a look at the midway and see what it had to offer. This Fair was the biggest moment in Johnny's life so far. He'd always watched Brad competing in the races and been proud of him, but this year he was to be a competitor himself. There'd been a piece about him in the Dorchester paper. "The youngest dirt track auto driver in the state," it said about him. "If he has the same competitive spirit that has made his father, Brad Everton, famous, the more experienced drivers will have to look to their laurels."

Of course Johnny wanted desperately to win, and he believed he had a great chance. He hadn't taken Brad very seriously when Brad had hinted that there might be danger for him in the race. He knew Brad was worried about his driving, and secretly he was proud of the fact that neither his father nor his mother had voiced any objections. It showed the kind of good sports they were. Well, Johnny meant to show them that he was good—that they didn't need to worry about *him!* After the day's trotting races he had a greater desire than ever to win.

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Johnny tried everything on the midway. He started at one end and worked his way down to the other. When he finally wound up at the main food concession he was loaded down with a couple of Indian blankets, a basket of groceries, and a Shirley Temple doll, all won at the various skill games. He ordered himself a hot dog and a cup of coffee and was just beginning to eat when somebody sat down next to him at the counter. He turned, casually, to see who it was, and when he saw, the color began to mount slowly from the top of his collar until his whole face was very red.

It was a girl, a girl with a pretty, but rather hard face.

"Java—black—and a couple of crullers," she said to the counter man in a harsh voice.

Johnny looked quickly away but she had caught his glance for a moment. Johnny had seen this girl only a few moments before in the stuffy confinement of the tent in which the girl show was held. Johnny had been embarrassed about going into the girl show, but he had never seen one before and he decided that it was an experience he ought to have. Only a few minutes before he had seen this girl—heard her introduced as Miss Hazel L'Amour—and watched her do a very suggestive dance with a rather horrifying lack of clothing. At the time his thought had been that something terrible must have happened to drag this girl so low. Women were pretty sacred to Johnny Everton.

MISS HAZEL L'AMOUR, born Clara Bergen, saw Johnny's confusion and was amused. "You was just into the show, wasn't you?" she asked, as she lit a cigarette.

"Yeah," Johnny said. "Yes, I was, Miss L'Amour." He kept his eyes riveted on the frankfurter which he found thoroughly unappetizing.

"Like it?" the girl asked.

"Well, I— Well, you see—" Johnny floundered.

"Well, you didn't have to stay if you didn't like it," said Miss Hazel L'Amour, rather sharply.

"Oh, it wasn't that," said Johnny, hastily. "Really it wasn't. I just couldn't help wondering how you—how a girl like you—" He gave up, beseeching her with his eyes to understand. Miss L'Amour was disconcertingly silent. "I was just thinking that it must be kind of hard to—I mean when you have to go to all the fairs and—and—dance like that. Well, I should think there must be something else—I mean for a girl like you—" He gave up again, this time with finality.

Miss L'Amour was amused, and a trifle touched. Most of the yokels tried to date her up for after the show. Most of 'em took it for granted that was part of her job. She hadn't run across Johnny's kind of naïveté for a long time. Miss L'Amour was an actress of sorts, and it amused her to play a part.

"Lord knows I'd like to get out of it," she said, and Johnny failed to detect the phony quality of her voice. "But once you're in it, it gets you. You just earn enough to carry you on to the next fair. You never earn enough to save anything for new clothes, or for a chance to make a fresh start in life."

"Gee!" said Johnny, sympathetically. "That's tough."

"Tough!" said Miss L'Amour, working herself up into a fine dramatic humor. "You don't know the half of it. You don't know the half of it,

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Mr.— Did you tell me your name?"

"Everton. Johnny Everton," he said.

A quick change came over Miss L'Amour. A sudden shrewd light burned her eyes. "Everton, eh?" she said, softly. "Not Brad Everton's son?"

"That's right," said Johnny.

"Well, I guess I can talk to you," said Miss L'Amour. "Everybody that's ever played Dorchester knows what a square-shooter Brad Everton is. I guess his son would be the same kind of a fellow."

"I hope I'm half as good as Brad is," said Johnny, seriously.

"That's cute—calling him Brad," said Miss L'Amour. "Do you call him that to his face?"

"Mostly," Johnny confided. "He says it makes him feel old if a long drink of water like me calls him dad."

"Yeah, I can imagine," said Miss L'Amour. "Why you look more like brothers than father and son." Miss L'Amour sighed. "It must be great to know people like him. The heels you meet in this business, the cheap crooks . . ." Miss L'Amour's shudder was the height of artistry.

Johnny looked around. They were the only two at the counter. He leaned closer to Miss L'Amour and the strong scent of her perfume made him giddy for a moment. "Do you know this Silk Riley?" he asked.

Miss L'Amour looked away. Did she know Silk Riley! She had the adjoining room to Silk at the local hotel. She always had the adjoining room to Silk, wherever they worked. "Yes," she said demurely, "I know him."

"Tell me," said Johnny, eagerly, "is he on the level or not? Brad thinks—" And then Johnny stopped.

"What does Brad think?" Miss L'Amour asked.

"Well," said Johnny, suddenly uneasy, yet urged by the notion that perhaps he could learn something to go on, "he thinks Riley's a crook. He thinks there's ringers in the trottin' races and right now he's tryin' to check on the ownership of a couple of horses. You see I'm drivin' in the auto races tomorrow, and that's why I was wondering. Brad thinks Riley has his own men in all the races to keep from payin' out the prize money. He thinks maybe they'd try to stop me from winnin' by—well, by goin' to work on me."

Miss L'Amour flicked the ash from her cigarette. So Brad Everton was trying to check on horse owners. Silk ought to know that, and know it quick!

"That's crazy," she said. "Riley's no fool, mind you. He's out for every dime he can make, but he wouldn't pull nothing crooked. It wouldn't pay! He'd like to come back here another year. As for him pullin' any rough stuff on you—well, you don't really think you have a chance to win against all those experienced drivers, do you?"

"I'm *going* to win," said Johnny, with sublime confidence. Then he looked at the girl. "If I do," he said, slowly, "and some of the prize money would help you to quit this job and —and sort of look for somethin' where you wouldn't have to—well—gee, really, Miss L'Amour I hate to see a girl like you havin' to . . ." Once more he gave up.

Miss L'Amour wanted to laugh, but somehow she couldn't when she looked at Johnny's earnest face. She crushed out her cigarette in the saucer of her coffee cup and slid down off the stool.

"You're a good kid, Johnny," she said. "And if you do win— Well, come around and see me tomorrow night. Maybe I'll take you up—who knows?"

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MISS L'AMOUR hurried back toward her tent. On the way she encountered Punk Hogan.

"Find Silk and tell him I gotta see him pronto," she said. "It's important —to him!"

Five minutes later Silk Riley, mouthing his inevitable cigarette, and carrying his malacca stick, came in through the back entrance of the girl's tent. Miss L'Amour was sitting before an improvised dressing table, powdering her shapely shoulders. The spieler was already luring customers into the front of the tent for the next show.

"What's on your mind?" asked Silk.

Miss L'Amour didn't turn to look at him. "You better get them two phony owners of yours away somewhere," she said. "I just found out Brad Everton is on their trail and anxious to get 'em to talk."

"Who told you?" asked Silk, sharply.

"Everton's kid. We just had a heart-to-heart talk. It seems Everton's tumbled to the racket and he's out to get proof."

"Thanks, kid," said Riley, "I'll get those punks away where Everton won't find 'em till it's too late."

"The boy's driving in the auto races. He seems to think he has a good chance," she said.

Riley smiled his tight, one-sided smile. "From all I hear he'd have a good chance if we wanted to let him."

"What are you going to do?" Miss L'Amour asked. "Have one of the boys put his motor out of condition?"

"Can't risk it," said Riley, his cigarette bobbing between his lips. "He keeps his car down in that barn with his father's horses. If we got caught monkeyin' with the motor it'd give the whole show away. We'll take care of him in the race."

For the first time Miss L'Amour turned from her dressing table and looked at Riley. "That's pretty dangerous, isn't it?" she asked.

"For the kid," Riley said.

"Listen, Silk, he's a good kid—an awful good kid. Isn't there some other way you can handle this? If you go bumping him in a race he might get killed!"

A match flared as Riley lit a fresh cigarette. "So what?" he asked, casually.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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Little Green Buddha

By SINCLAIR GLUCK

Author of "White Flower," etc.

I

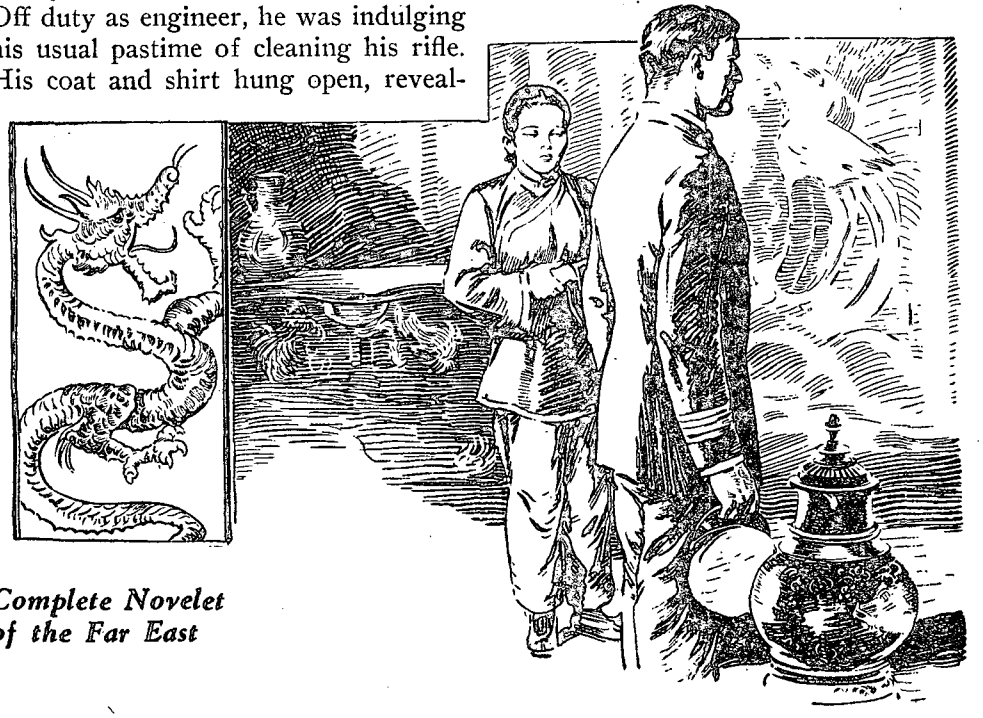
NIGHT spread a million stars over Shensi Province. The tug lay at anchor, nosing uneasily at her big twin hooks. Overside, the tributary waters of the Wei-Ho lapped at her tough planks with little chuckling, gurgling voices as they hurried past. There was no moon. A chill breeze from the north brought the waxing and waning mutter of distant gunfire.

In the tug's cabin a single kerosene lamp swayed in blind, uncertain movement above the table. The huge form of "Tiny" Huckle sat crouched on a bunk. Off duty as engineer, he was indulging his usual pastime of cleaning his rifle. His coat and shirt hung open, revealing the mat of curly hair on his chest. It glistened damply in the swaying light.

Dan Brice sat opposite, black eyes thoughtful, hands relaxed, an air of steady listening on his lean, dark face.

Footsteps sauntered past on deck. Sam Placer, third of the trio of ex-marines, had first watch. Brice could almost see his calm blue eyes peering into the darkness.

After a last squint through his shimmering rifle barrel, Tiny's dangerous little eyes came to rest on Brice. Without many thoughts of his own, Tiny disliked silence the way nature abhors a vacuum.



Complete Novelet of the Far East

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"Well, we got this far," he grumbled, "with all that gold aboard. Over a ton of it. That don't seem just right."

"What don't seem right?" asked Brice lazily. These three had stuck together for years, and Tiny's quicker-witted pals had long since taken his mental drowsiness for granted.

"A million dollars in gold—U.S. dollars, not Mex. And you can't carry the stuff! Who ever heard o' loot you couldn't *lift?* Why'n't this Marshal Chen take bills?"

"Gold's pretty good anywhere," said Brice. "Like you say, it *ain't* easy to lift. Maybe that's why Chen wanted gold. Anyhow, we should worry—*if* we get the emerald."

"An inch high, huh?" snorted Tiny. "For a million dollars it oughta be a foot high. That's what gets me."

Brice laughed. "It's a perfect little figure of the Buddha, carved out of a single emerald. Priests smuggled it out of Pekin back in the Boxer days, before the looting. And Marshal Chen found it in some temple. It's old, Tiny, and just about priceless."

"Yeah? Well, who's payin' a million for it?"

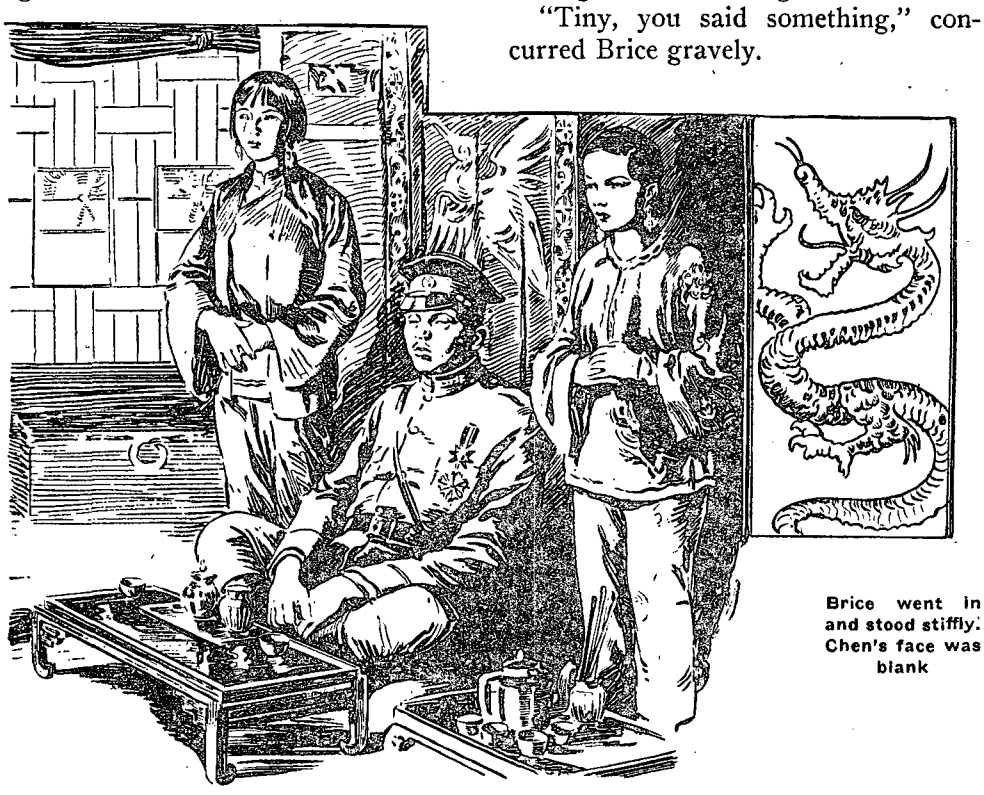
"Some rich American collector. We ain't supposed to know that. And who cares?" Brice paused to listen. "Chang Wo says the emperor was so pleased with the guy who made it that he had his hands cut off, so he wouldn't make another. Then he detailed some girls to feed the guy by hand as long as he lived. Pretty soft, eh?"

"Yeah?" said Tiny dubiously.

"Only the girls got sick of it and fed the guy bamboo slivers, so he kind of died. That's the yarn."

"Any guy that'll trust a dame *oughta* get a double cross! And," added Tiny in disgust, "he'll sure get it."

"Tiny, you said something," concurred Brice gravely.



Brice went in and stood stiffly. Chen's face was blank

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"Now this Chang," said Tiny, settling himself for a discussion, "ain't so bad, huh? Can you figure a Chink jeweler cookin' like he can?"

IT was the purchaser's agent and not Brice who had selected Chang Wo. Ostensibly their guide, interpreter and cook, Chang had actually come with them to make sure they got the real emerald. Brice thought the Chinese jeweller a little *too* smooth and obliging, but kept that idea to himself.

"Yeah," Tiny rambled on, "I've known cookies would start on you with an ax if you spoke outa turn. But not Chang. Say, Dan, he don't know you c'n talk the lingo, huh?"

Brice shook his head. "Don't let him know it, Tiny."

"Who, me? Not me! Say, know what he told me, Dan? He says when these Chinks up here take a dislike to a guy, they tie his hands behind him and hang him up by the neck, see? But they put a lotta thin tiles under his feet so he can breathe. So they give him all the chow he wants, and every day they take away one tile. Like that, it takes 'em a couple weeks to hang the guy. They play nice together, huh?"

"Clever people, these—Chinamen." Brice yawned to hide his interest. Tiny had described a common form of death by torture, one not limited to these northern provinces or Chen's army. Why had Chang tried to frighten Tiny with it?

"Back in a minute," he said, and prowled out on deck.

The special forehatch was intact, the battens tight. Under it were ten cases of solid gold bars, the cases weighing about two hundred and fifty pounds each. They were labeled:

AMMUNITION—SMALL ARMS—.38 CAL.

Brice spoke quietly. Sam followed him into the bows. From the tug's blunt stem, two breastworks of wooden cases ran aft to port and starboard for twenty feet. The cases were stacked two deep and two high. They held cans of corned-beef and would stop a steel rifle bullet.

Bolted to the deck between these breastworks stood Tiny's pride, the "Barking Dog." It was a shining, one-pound quick-firer on a swivel base. Barrel, shoulder rest and recoil mechanism were covered by a loose tarpaulin.

"Listen to the guns," said Brice. "Sounds natural, eh? We'd better get the tarp off this one and break out a few shells. The way Tiny has her greased, it won't hurt overnight—" He fell to work.

"What's up?" muttered Sam as they folded the tarpaulin.

"Nothing. Marshal Chen has a couple of gunboats—that's all. He might get a notion to grab the gold and keep his emerald—blame it on pirates. His boats will have heavier guns they can't shoot. It's a good deal too dark to suit me."

"Tiny'll tickled 'em up with this!" Sam patted the gun. "But we shoulda gone on tonight, Dan. That plane's due to meet us day after tomorrow. It'll take us all tomorrow to reach Singan-Fu. That don't leave much time."

"Our spotlight won't show snags and the Wei-Ho's tricky. We'd look swell hard and fast aground—or sunk."

"That's so," agreed Sam above the screech of nails. "Why didn't they *send* the gold by plane? There!"

With the case open, Brice arranged the shells handily. "Because a plane couldn't carry the gold and enough fuel too, to make the trip. Anywhere the pilot sat down to refuel, they'd likely grab those cases, whatever was in 'em.

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But we're out from shore an' better armed—" He paused to listen to the faint clatter of pans from the galley. "Keep an eye on Chang," he added quietly. "Don't let him kind of by accident show a light for'd."

"*Chang!*" whispered Sam keenly. "What's he done?"

"Nothing. He's just a bit too helpful. Maybe I'm wrong, but stick around here. He knows we've got the gold aboard. I'm going aft—"

FROM the stern of the tug, breastworks ran for'd on each side to the engine room and the cabin entrance.

A first-class machine gun was bolted to the deck near the stern. Tiny called it their "Spittin' Cat" and took good care of it, but he preferred the "Barking Dog" because of its range.

A loose tarpaulin covered the machine gun. Brice lifted this enough to make sure the gun held a belt of cartridges, then let it fall. A speck of rust and the gun might jam when they needed it most.

Less than a mile astern, the Wei-Ho emptied into the Hwang-Ho. They had steamed up the Grand Canal from Yangchau, then west up the Hwang (yellow) river, to anchor in the little Wei-Ho for the night. Singan-Fu lay eighty miles up the Wei-Ho. It was Marshal Chen's headquarters against the red armies to the north. And it was their destination.

Even by starlight, Brice could see the vast, pale expanse of the Hwang-Ho astern of them, its yellow waters rolling down from the north, to swing east in a great bend.

Half a mile away to the southeast a walled village cast a broad, smoky fan of light skyward. Between gusts of wind Brice could hear the beat of drums and distant yells.

Suddenly, vividly, he was a boy again, loitering down a country road in the harvest-scented night. Dark trees rose ahead. From around the bend came light and distant music, a blur of voices and thumping feet. No barn dance for him! He was afraid of girls. Brice smiled faintly. Deep down, he still distrusted the nice ones, but only with the caution of an outlander now— He wheeled sharply.

"Oh, velly fine night!" came a startled voice.

Brice pointed. "You've left the galley door open, Chang. Go and close it, and don't show a light again. You're careless as the devil, even for a Chinaman."

Now to call a Chinese a Chinaman is to make a serious breach of etiquette. "Oh, bad mistake," agreed Chang with dignity. He walked for'd. The door closed. He did not reappear.

Brice looked up at the stars. There was nothing against Chang except that he seemed a little too smooth, and now a little too careless. And *had* tried to string Tiny with that torture yarn. Little things, all. But this was a tricky job.

Heavy rains in the north had made their up-stream voyage take longer than he figured. In case Marshal Chen repented his bargain, a plane was to meet Brice in the open about five miles south of Singan-Fu, and fly back with the priceless emerald Buddha. The plane was due the next noon but one—in about forty hours. The pilot had orders not to wait because of the proximity of Chen's army. Thus time was short. If they missed the plane, they'd be left with that sacred emerald, in the heart of China, between two hostile armies. Even if Chen kept his bargain, the news of it would get out. If Chen decided to recapture the little green

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Buddha— Brice had held their three lives in his hands many times, but never against such long odds. And, said instinct, Chang was a dark horse.

A low call from Sam Placer made him turn and race for'd. Sam's flashlight shot over the rail, danced an instant, then steadied on a white face alongside. The swimmer was gasping, almost spent. A thin hand clawed at the low tug fender. Sam caught that wrist, and Brice caught the other as it came up. With unexpected ease they hoisted the swimmer aboard and into a double armlock. There was a helpless struggle, a cry of pain. Sam's free hand shot out, and withdrew.

"Sweet cats!" he chuckled, "we caught us a mermaid!"

II

BRICE had left Sam on deck, led the girl to the cabin and sent the gaping Tiny for Chang. The girl was Chinese, with delicate, patrician features. Her long black hair was tangled down her back. The soaked tunic and trousers clung to her frankly. Yet she faced him with her head up, her chest heaving, her smooth lips parted, and quivering in and out a little, as she panted.

"You will—save me?" she gasped, in Chinese.

Brice looked blank, smiled, shook his head.

Tiny came back, followed by Chang. Brice sent Tiny on deck. The huge engineer looked disappointed, helped himself to another brief appraisal of the girl and shouldered out, grinning.

The girl had tilted her head up a little more.

"Chang," said Brice. "Ask her who she is; why she was in the water; what she wants."

Chang questioned the girl briefly in Chinese.

"Explain to the foreign devil," she panted, "that this female person was captured six days past by the men of Marshal Chen—may his name be forgotten! There was suspicion, and questioning with rods upon the hands, to no purpose. The next day there was to be questioning with rods upon the shoulders. And the next—death advancing slowly—"

She glanced at Brice, but his face was still blank. Chang translated accurately. Then when Brice stared and frowned, Chang seized one of the girl's hands and turned it palm upward. She winced, but showed the other hand silently.

"Let go of her!" Brice said.

Chang obeyed in surprise. The girl at least understood tone and action. Her dark eyes glimmered her thanks. The palms and fingers of her small hands were discolored, badly swollen, hot-looking.

Despite his flare of angry disgust, Brice thought the injuries looked more recent than she said. "Ask her how she escaped—and her name," he told Chang.

When the jeweller had repeated both questions in Chinese, she answered, "Tell the white devil this female person is called Mei-ling. There was a guard who does not love the enemies of China. He helped her to escape that first night and cross the river. Being on foot, she dared not flee north toward the Nationalist camp. Therefore, she fled east blindly, day by day, fed and sheltered by men and women of the fields, perhaps two hundred *li* (eighty miles), to the Yellow River. Yet there was pursuit. As the dragon of the west began to eat the sun tonight, this female person saw the horsemen like

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black demons riding from the sun, riding upon her—"

Holding his hand up, Chang translated, once more omitting the naive "devil" by which she referred to Brice.

"All right," he smiled. "Why did she swim to us?"

Mei-ling listened with dignity to Chang's question, then continued, "Thinking herself observed, this female person fled to this nearby river and hid among the reeds. At dusk came this pushing boat, and clutched the riverbed with its iron fingers. This female person swam down upon it with difficulty, hoping to live. Oh, Honorable One, plead with this foreign—man to show pity! Request him to hide this unimportant maiden, or she dies—in shameful discomfort—"

BRICE decided that the girl's need had lifted him out of the devil class. Even in her wet clothes, she possessed the dignified charm peculiar to well-bred Chinese girls. And her wet, oval face was quite lovely.

Looking blank until Chang had translated, Brice requested him to ask her whether Marshal Chen had gunboats up the Wei-Ho.

When the girl was asked this question in Chinese, her dark eyes grew proud and brilliant with tears. "Not so!" she cried. "At dying moon two thunder vessels lay side by side. A man who loved China crept upon one of them and permitted a bomb to fall among bombs. These spoke with a great voice, and fire rose to the sky. So also spoke the other thunder vessel, with a louder voice and greater flame. This person saw one of the great thunder guns rise in lazy bigness, turning so"—the girl made a slow, rising and descending spiral with her hand—"until it smote the water. Soon no trace remained except the clashing waves—" Her voice shook a little. "The person who loved China was my brother." She looked straight ahead while tears fell slowly.

Brice looked puzzled, then took his eyes from the girl as Chang explained. More questions were asked and interpreted, together with their answers.

"Ask her whether she actually is a communist—"

"This person (feminine) loves China and so hates the enemies of China. We are Nationalists, not reds. The Central Government bows to the enemies of China, like an ill-advised duck extending its neck to the fox. We would drive away the fox. So Marshal Chen—may he lack a son—will fight against us—for a time. Not long."

"Ask her how she was caught six days ago, Chang."

"This daughter of China stood on the shore, happy, without tears, when the thunder vessels were destroyed, and her brother went to join his noble ancestors. Six days ago she returned, hoping dutifully to find her brother's body, and she was caught—for asking questions."

Brice hesitated. "Tell her that we go to Singan-Fu, the heart of Chen's army."

"Honorable One, plead with the foreign soldier to take me with you! Will they seek me at Singan-Fu?"

"Tell her the soldiers know she hid in the reeds. When they do not find her, they will know where she is, and send word. Perhaps they saw the light when she came aboard."

"Tell him," the girl urged rather piteously, "that Chen's soldiers *always* make camp at dusk. They saw no light. When they do not find me in the morning, they will think this female person has run north, or drowned herself. Re-

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quest him to withhold this maiden from a shameful death—" The girl shivered and averted her eyes for the first time.

Brice had to listen until her words were translated. "All right, Chang," he shrugged. "There's not much privacy aboard. You and Mr. Huckle fix up a nest for her in the hold. There's more air in the bows from the hawseholes. Meanwhile, I'll find her a towel and some sort of clothes—"

"The kind-hearted foreign devil consents," Chang told the girl with faint irony. Then he withdrew.

LEFT alone with her, Brice found a reasonably clean towel and gave her head a rub with it. Smiling weakly, she took it and went on drying her hair. He rummaged a bit and came back to her with a heavy shirt of his own and a pair of clean slacks which Sam had hacked off at the knee. He held these out with a shrug, his eyes twinkling.

The girl took them with a smile of quaint dignity. She looked at the unshaded skylights, the lamp and the door. Then she flushed a little and stood hesitant.

He nodded bluntly, turned and went on deck. Shoes were out of the question. Anyhow, her leather, Thibetan sandals would dry in the warm cabin—and probably shrink. But the loose strap from the points would leave room for her toes.

The forehatch was open. Brice could hear Tiny and Chang bumping around down there. Sam was in the bows, and Brice joined him there.

"How's the mermaid?" asked Sam.

"Not bad. She's getting dry. Gave her your pants."

"Yeah? You ain't got any, huh? What's her yarn?"

Brice told him quickly, adding: "We owe her something. Her brother blew up Chen's little battle-wagons."

"No foolin'? That's one up for our side. She's a red? And you're takin' her up to *Chen's* outfit?"

"Tiny's fixing her a bed in the bows. We'll hoist out the gold ourselves. If she keeps still they won't find her. It's not so good, fooling with her, but there's no time to land her anywhere she'd be safe."

"We need a cute housekeeper anyway," chuckled Sam.

Because of her sore hands, Brice allowed her fifteen minutes. Then he returned to the cabin and knocked. She invited him to enter, but he waited until she opened the door.

She had buttoned the shirt to the neck, and stood barefoot, holding up the slacks with one hand. They fell almost to her thin ankles. The voluminous garments made her look ridiculous—and most enticing.

He found a belt, strung it through the slacks and cut a new hole to accommodate her slim waist. Then he fished out his first aid kit and gently spread some burn lotion on her bruised hands. When he had bandaged them he took her by the arms, sat her on a bunk and caught one of her bare ankles. She tried at first to withdraw it, but at his smiling persistence she relaxed with a faint protest.

He found a blister on the middle toe of her narrow delicate foot, and another one on the heel, but none on the hard little sole. The other foot was the same, but had no blister on the pale toes. Five days—eighty miles—of walking and sometimes running, perhaps, should have left her feet crippled in those tough sandals.

He left the blisters alone, but found her a pair of thick socks. While she was

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drawing them on, she looked up and said quietly in Chinese, "For many *li* this feminine person rode upon a horse. Later she was hidden in carts. Otherwise, how could she have escaped her swift pursuers?"

Brice shook his head blankly. He led her on deck and lowered her into the hold, using the cases of gold for steps. Her bed was made on a tarpaulin between the damp chain boxes. When she had smuggled into it, he said "Good night" in English and went on deck, leaving the hatch open for air, and in order to get the gold out quickly the next day.

Sam came to meet him, grinning in the darkness. "She sleeps in the hold, along with the gold," he chanted. "Poem! Did you tuck her in and kiss her, Dan?"

"You go to the devil," said Brice absently, wondering whether Mei-ling had lied. Certainly her yarn about those gunboats and her brother had rung with truth.

"Call me at midnight, Sam," he added. "Not eight bells in the morning, either. And keep them seductive blue eyes on deck. She's all in. G'-night—"

WATCH after watch passed without incident. Tiny had steam up at dawn. Before sunrise they had pulled hooks and started nosing up the Wei-Ho. As he returned from the bows, Brice saw dark, startled eyes in a pale face staring up at him from just below the hatch level.

"Oh!" breathed Mei-ling in Chinese. "Your sleeping guest thought herself in the jaws of a great dragon, and rose hurriedly! It was—the chains of the iron fingers?"

Brice almost nodded, but shook his head stupidly. Lying asleep between the two chain boxes, she must have been scared by the noise. He scanned both deserted banks, reached down and lifted her smoothly on deck by the wrists. He took her to the cabin, showed her where to wash and went to the galley. There he asked Chang to feed Mei-ling in the cabin. They would breakfast later.

The current was not swift, but there was still enough to reduce their speed in the straight, smooth reaches of water, where Brice could risk trying to make up time.

Mei-ling had her lunch in the hold. Later, both Sam and Tiny swung below at different times and poked around the hold for no reason at all. Each reappeared on deck very soon, looking baffled and rather sheepish.

The sun had squeezed behind the mountains before they came in sight of the docks of Singan-Fu with the lights of the city showing farther inland. The gold remained below. They could hoist it on deck themselves without permitting anyone else to go down into the hold.

Before leaving Shanghai, Brice had sent word through the purchaser's agent for Marshal Chen to meet him at the river bank of the Wei-Ho, opposite Singan-Fu. The exchange would take place there. If Chan tried to slip him a phony emerald, such an arrangement would give Brice at least a chance to protect the gold. Afterwards, his message had said, he would be honored to remain a day or two as the Marshal's guest. By this plan Brice hoped, if the emerald was genuine, to get away to the plane with it. These had seemed the best plans to make, until they were actually on the ground.

Now, as they dropped anchor well out from shore, they were a full day late. Twilight had just begun. There was no sign of preparations to attack

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the tug. Neither was there any reception committee, but this was typically Chinese.

Brice shrugged and noted the planks and debris from the wrecked gunboats scattered along the north shore. This much of Mei-ling's story was proved anyway—which lent credit to the rest. The reds, or Nationalists, seemed to be a determined lot.

Nothing happened until darkness shrouded the pale river. Then a small dinghy put out from shore and came weaving toward the tug, the rower splashing nobly.

III

CHANG had the evening meal ready for all five of them. At a call from Brice he left it to keep warm and joined the three ex-marines at the tug's low waist.

The boat swung clumsily alongside, thumped bow and stern against the tug and grew more or less stationary. The man who had been clinging to both thwarts rose and stepped aboard, where his sword almost tripped him. He was a Chinese officer in a whole lot of uniform, including a general's insignia.

Brice set down the lantern and bowed grimly. The general acknowledged this by touching his chest. "I," he announced, "are General Tang Li Woo! Luck for you, I say English! Good night, chaps! You are bring the agreeable amount of—"

"Ammunition!" Brice cut in smoothly. "Good night, General. You are bring the agreeable payment?"

A swift kick from Sam changed Tiny's howl of mirth to a gasp of pain, which the general ignored.

"Not this night," said General Tang Li Woo regretfully. "Marshal Chen talk welcome and sorry for you, but too engaged. Tomorrow pretty soon exchange come to happen and you comfortable guests. Tonight your boat she lie down in river and sleep all safe. That all. Good morning for tomorrow, gentle chaps. Now I departure."

Brice swore under his breath. The arrangement cut his time still finer, but he could not say so. He stood by while his visitor got into the dinghy, hoping that Tang would fall overboard. However, the general sat down with a crash and a grunt and waved one hand cautiously.

"So long and pleased dreams," he called. Then he lowered his voice, adding in vicious Chinese: "Now, soul of a louse, get me off this accursed water, with *care*—"

The ex-marines watched the dinghy wander shoreward, then grinned at each other dubiously.

"Nothing to do but wait, huh?" suggested Placer.

"Guess so." Brice turned to Chang. "Take Mei-ling her dinner first, will you, Chang? Don't show a light going below, of course. Have your own, while Mei-ling eats if you like. Then we'll have chow in the cabin, one at a time."

"All light," said Chang and withdrew to the galley.

"What a guy," said Tiny, licking his chops. "Say, Dan, what'll you gimme for old Ting Ling Wing? Is *that* guy a sketch? How'd he ever get to be a general?"

"Yeah, how did he?" said Brice. "Not by that cowtown vaudeville! I don't like it much."

"Huh? You mean he was kinda puttin' on an act?"

"If you thought he was a fool, maybe that's what he wanted. How did he strike you, Sam?"

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"Search me. I was thinkin' about that plane at noon tomorrow. It don't leave us *any* time."

"We'll figure about that tomorrow. I'm thinking about tonight," said Brice. "If we trust this outfit as far as we can throw the Summer Palace we can't go wrong. We'll make our watches overlap tonight. And stand by the search light—" He broke off as Chang sidled past with a bowl of soup for Mei-ling.

WHAT they called their searchlight was merely a powerful spotlight run from a car battery. With no way to recharge the battery on these trips, the light was sparingly used, but on a dark night it was effective at some distance.

They had turned to watch Chang set the bowl on deck, lower himself into the hold and reach up for it. He was gone rather a long time. Suddenly he popped out on deck and came slap-slapping aft to them, minus the bowl.

"Oh, strange thing!" he exclaimed, halting in front of Brice. "Chinese female all gone! How do it, please?"

Brice hesitated, then strode for'd. He sheltered the lantern, lowered it into the hold and vaulted down. At sight of three curious faces peering down at him, he rapped out, "Get on with dinner, Chang! You two keep watch fore and aft. I'll be up in a minute—"

Their faces disappeared. Brice went stooping into the bows. There was no sign of Mei-ling. Her dry clothes and sandals had been transferred from the galley to the hold that afternoon. These were missing. Her blankets had been folded. On them lay Placer's slacks and his own shirt, also folded, and his neatly coiled belt.

Beyond doubt she was gone—had slipped into the river to starboard while they were all talking to General Tang Li Woo. But why? To drown herself? Not Mei-ling.

He scowled down at the belt, remembering her slenderness and her poise. These and her young courage had made him like this girl better than most. He was disappointed to find her gone—and even more worried.

Rolling clothes and blankets under one arm, he carried the lantern aft to the gold. The cases were intact. No one had disturbed or even tried to open one of them. Otherwise there would have been fresh scars on the soiled wood.

He climbed on deck, replaced the blankets in their locker and put the other things neatly away in the cabin. All three men had formed the habit of neatness in their cramped quarters. Brice had their primitive table set by the time Chang came in to dish the chow; and then he went slowly out on deck.

Mei-ling had come to them out of the night, then slipped quietly back into it, leaving behind her a delicate, mental fragrance. Why had she left their protection in the camp of her enemies? Brice had sensed in the girl a quality of pure fanaticism. If she thought that he and Tiny and Sam were in league with Marshal Chen, had she left them in order to betray them in some way? She had friends among Chen's men. In the mind of a political or religious fanatic, personal obligation and gratitude have no meaning.

He remembered a remark made in his hearing by an officer of high rank: "A clever, devoted woman spy is worth at least two brigades—"

Tiny and Sam saw him and bore down from either direction, a half-serious interest showing on their faces.

"Hey, Dan," said Tiny, "is she A. W. O. L., sure enough?"

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"Guess so," nodded Brice, "but she mighta got the wind up and hidden somewhere else. We'll start at the bows and search the old scow alow and aloft. Come on—"

Each had a flashlight. The tug was not large and the job was soon done. They found everything shipshape, but no girl. The end of the search left them on the stern deck.

"I guess she musta kinda slipped overboard," said Tiny, "if she ain't here."

Sam spoke in a hushed voice, "I knew it! One look at Tiny's map an' the poor kid drowned herself."

"Aw, nuts!" said Brice irritably. "Soup's on. You better go slop it up, Sam, so's we can all eat. You keep your peepers open in the bows, huh, Tiny? I'll stay here."

The others exchanged a brief glance by lantern light. Sam wheeled and made for the cabin. Tiny went on into the bows, where he opened and snicked home the breech of the Barking Dog in glum silence. Things were lousy when Brice got sore.

Tiny assumed a slow grin. Brice was human. Maybe the guy had fallen for a dame at last! She was a cute trick—

THE night passed almost uneventfully, with over-lapping watches. They all got some sleep, but none of them very much. About three bells after midnight Sam heard prolonged noises to port, on the south shore. Brice was asleep and had not wanted the spot-light used if it could be avoided. Anyhow, Sam thought the noises were some distance inland. He walked aft to warn Tiny to keep awake, and let it go at that.

Finally, dawn paled the eastern skies and tinted a shoal of little clouds to salmon pink. Brice and Sam were on watch now, their calm, lean faces blue and gray with cold. As the light grew, Brice told Sam to go below and get his sleep. No use showing him what Brice had dimly seen. There was nothing they could do about it.

When Sam left him alone on deck, Brice walked to the rail and stood gazing moodily ashore.

During the night a battery of field guns had been deployed to face the tug. They were not more than a hundred yards inland, he judged, and looked like French Seventy-fives. At that point-blank range, a single volley would blow the tug out of the water—or sink her, at least.

Half a dozen men in uniform lounged behind each gun. As Brice watched, an officer shouted at the men, his voice ringing faintly over the water in the dawn silence. One by one the muzzles of all four guns were depressed and trained squarely on the tug. The officer walked away. The men resumed their lounging attitudes. The edge of the rising sun struck one of the long, vicious barrels to a lance of fire.

By daylight, with a stationary target, not even the Chinese could miss at that range.

Brice turned slowly away and made for the pilot-house where Chang slept. He woke the Chinese and asked him in a quiet voice to start the coffe for breakfast. Then he resumed his watch while the other two slept.

The Wei-Ho was clear water, cold and at least visually clean. As the sun rose higher, Brice stripped, dove in to starboard for a quick swim, climbed out, dried himself and dressed in a hurry. Then he woke the others and sat down to breakfast with an appetite, guns or no guns.

Chang gave him canned pineapple, corned-beef hash, canned peas, hard-

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tack, marmalade and black coffee. He was still on the pineapple when Sam and Tiny came in with the news about the guns. He waved them out again with his mouth full. They went out grinning, and he heard them dive.

The corned-beef hash was swell.

It was after ten before they saw General Tang ride down to the docks and dismount. By this time the Barking Dog had been wiped dry, greased and re-covered.

A dinghy came wobbling out to the tug and General Tang Li Woo sprang aboard rather more smartly than last night. He was in field uniform and less conspicuous. In the sunlight Brice read both strength and craftiness in his smiling face.

"Bright day, gentle soldier," he announced. "Have bring sweet news! Glorious Marshal Chen have consent to make exchange at these headquarters! He have lust to meet honored visitor in Singan-Fu, and give nice entertainments!"

Brice shook his own hand politely. "And the guns, big General? What kind of lust is that?" He pointed.

"Oh, so, that guns?" exclaimed General Tang blandly. "That are simple for exercise lazy soldier mans! Manovers, are not it said? Ha! Ha! Maybe noble visitor wish salute! Then too easy, yes? How not find blanks, you say?"

"How not?" agreed Brice dryly. "What else?"

"Maybe noble visitor bring boat to be rubbing dock. Oh, so soon come ample cart for gold, best troop for escort noble visitor into inside Singan-Fu. Weigh gold, yes? Make exchange, yes? Then all loving kindness, I think."

Brice hesitated. "How soon come ample cart, great General Tang Li Woo? One hour? Humble visitor wish finish business, then enjoy noble company."

"One hour—two hour—hope so. What matter? You be favored guest two day—three day—not do?"

Without a sign from Brice, Sam and Tiny aproached the general from either side with a kind of velvet laziness.

General Tang paled a little but held his ground.

"If gentle visitors show love for this person with strong embrace—or insist remain—then orders are to—fire salute. Maybe not find blanks. So bad for all, yes?"

BRICE glanced shoreward. Men held the lanyards of all four guns, watching an officer who in turn watched the group on the tug. If it was a bluff it was a good one.

"If Marshal Chen means to keep his bargain," asked Brice, "why all this—saluting?"

"Marshal Chen will act same—will keep word good. But are other thinkings why rather make exchange Singan-Fu."

Brice laughed easily. "You're a brave man, General Tang. I believe you. My respects to you. But I like to finish business before pleasure. You will send cart at once?"

"If so much haste," the general smiled, "I will do best. Now you permit envoy depart in peace, as say Bible, I think so. Twice more I say, fine mornings all around, sirs."

They all shook hands with themselves. General Tang got into the boat with more dignity and was rowed ashore.

All three ex-marines watched him in silence until he remounted.

"And there," muttered Sam at last, "goes our chance at the plane—five miles inland. It's ten-thirty now."

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IV

AS soon as Tiny could get steam up, Brice had raised anchor and jockeyed in toward shore. Now the tug was fast to a dock, rubbing her low bumper against the piles with sleepy, creaking sounds. Chang had tidied away the dishes, washed a few garments, hung them to dry and was getting lunch.

It was fifteen minutes past noon and all very peaceful. The cart had not arrived. But the plane, presumably, had come and gone. They had not seen it, or heard it.

In the cabin, Sam and Tiny stared glumly at nothing while Brice explained his rather optimistic plans.

"Now here's how it is," he said, stroking his knees. "I think Marshal Chen means to kick through with the emerald. Otherwise, he coulda dropped shells aboard, wiped us out and helped himself to the gold. He can't know about the plane, so this delay is just the usual Chinese way of doing things. If he wants to weigh and test that gold in Singan-Fu before the exchange, you can't blame him. It would be awkward here at the docks, and he may have other reasons. Anyhow, he had the drop on us. That put him in a position to dictate—"

"*Had* the drop on us?" asked Sam quickly.

Brice nodded. "I'm coming to that. Now let's say he means to hand over the emerald. That doesn't mean he won't change his mind. Once I have the emerald, what's to prevent some of his men, got up like bandits, knocking me over for it? He wouldn't know a thing about it, see? Nobody can control these bandits. It's just my hard luck. The exchange was made, and that lets him out. With the plane gone now, where does that leave us?"

"Safe aboard here, with the gold," grumbled Tiny.

"Safe, my foot," said Brice mildly. "We've got to see it through. After the exchange, I'll be in Singan-Fu—"

"*We'll* be in Singan-Fu," said Tiny belligerently. "I'd like a crack at some of them bandits right now!"

"Aw, be your age," Sam cut in without heat. "Then what's on your mind, Dan? We stay aboard, huh?"

An exasperated howl from Tiny made them both smile. "Aw, fer cryin' out loud!" he exploded. "This'll be the third time Sam an' me have stayed aboard here, like a coupla dish-faced school marms, while you went ashore an'— You're gonna *need* us, Dan!"

"Sure, Tiny. Now look. I've been in jams as bad as this before. What got me out? Having you guys ready on the tug for a close finish! This time I'll need you aboard the tug just the same, only we gotta use strategy. If I get the emerald Buddha, they'll naturally lay for me on the way back here. Suppose I make it. Then maybe Chen'll throw off the mask, wipe us out and help himself. We're right under his guns. So what? So I gotta meet you elsewhere."

"Shanghai?" suggested Sam with heavy irony.

Brice laughed. "You, too, huh? Now listen. I know the country and speak the lingo. The minute I get the emerald, I'm gonna fade into the scenery where they won't look. You'd be no good at that. We'd *all* get it. But if you wait for me—say ten miles downstream where you can maneuver against his field guns—I've got a good chance."

Sam grinned slowly. "I get it. *That's* why you tied up here so easy, huh?"

"Of course. We don't want to slip our anchors. If you tried to raise 'em after dark, they'd hear it, and blow you apart before you could get started. This

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way, all you gotta do is cut free of the dock and slip away downstream. What's more, those guns aren't trained on us here. The dock's in the way. They likely won't hear you. If they do, you'll be moving fast before they can start shooting. They won't *expect* you to leave, because I'll be ashore."

"How'll you find us at night?" asked Sam dubiously. "We can't anchor—but, of course, we can show a light—"

"Nix. I'll find you by the funnel-glow, and I'll show the light. Then you can row ashore for me, Sam. If I can't make it tonight, maybe you can stick it out another day and night. There's a bend to the north about ten miles down. Get around that and they can't see you downstream or along the south shore. Suppose they do locate you, and are nutty enough to trot up those field guns—"

Sam laughed. The one-pound shells for the quick-firer were the best to be had; the propelling charges perfectly uniform. Tiny had a real knack with the gun. They both swore he could drop a shell on a dime anywhere within the Barking Dog's range.

"If they keep their field guns out of our range," he said. "They'll have a job to hit the moving tug before *we're* out of range. And if they come near enough to hit *us*, Tiny'll blow hell out of the gun crews before they can line up to fire. We'll stick. Anything else?"

"You'd better slip away as soon as you can after dark." Brice hesitated. "One thing. If that Chinese girl shows up again, never mind what she says. Tie her up and hide her. I don't want her hurt, of course. But—I don't want her to get away again. She *could* be mixed up in this business, somehow. I don't say she is. Okay?"

"Oh, yeah," Sam answered sulkily. "We'll wait downstream." The sulkiness masked his shrewd glance. "We can hang on to one girl, too, I guess. You'll have to take Chang with you. What'll you do with him afterward?"

"How do I know?" asked Brice reasonably. "I'll have to be guided by how things work out. All settled?"

Tiny swore under his breath. "Same old story," he grunted. "Well, who's for a dip before lunch?"

THEY had a swim and the mid-day meal in peace. Nothing happened ashore except a cavalry drill. Tiny and Sam went ashore to watch it. When they came back, they said the guns and gunners were still there. The guns hadn't been moved. Tiny said the drill looked like scrambled eggs, but maybe it was a new kind of polo. The horses were fine.

"I had a good look," Sam told Brice. "If there's any guard watching the tug, it's well hidden."

Late in the afternoon, a fairly trim escort of soldiers and a solid army wagon drawn by two mules came slowly across the flats from Singan-Fu. They had been watching for it. Brice called to Chang to get ready to go ashore. Then all three ex-marines slowly hoisted the gold on deck.

General Tang arrived in command of the escort. On horseback, he had the bearing of a soldier. Lean-faced, expressionless, he gave orders in a slow, high-pitched voice. After greeting the Americans, he had the wagon backed out on the dock and the gold loaded into it. His men were obedient, but lacked any snap in their movements. It seemed to Brice that he could detect a hint of uncertainty in General Tang's orders. The men were slow. He made no attempt to hurry them.

Three lead horses had been provided. Brice thanked the general, but ex-

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plained that his two companions would remain aboard the tug to overhaul her engines. As this might require two days, and they would be here two days, it seemed a good chance to tear down her engines and clean them.

"Oh, wise sayings," General Tang agreed blandly.

"The Honorable Chang Wo," continued Brice, "will come with me. He joined us partly as interpreter. Thanks to your wonderful English, General, he will not be needed in that way. But the purchaser wishes him to see the—payment—before we accept it."

"Of course, so," the general murmured politely. "The wagon are now loaded. Can we push off, I think?"

They got Chang into the saddle. He appeared very clumsy, too clumsy for his intelligence. By little signs it was evident to Brice that Chang was an excellent horseman. As a Chinese jeweller, this made him even more of a mystery.

Orange sunlight cast their long shadows slantwise over the dusty plain before they reached the gate of the city. The noise of a great hammering from the tug was softened by distance, but continued. Brice had to repress a grin.

Inside the gate, the narrow streets were cool and dim. Curious black eyes followed the horsemen, the rumbling wagon and the soldiers, as they wound through the heart of the city and turned north. Brice sensed hostility rather than respect in those silent stares. Either Marshal Chen or his cause was not popular in Singan-Fu.

They halted in front of a large Chinese hotel. It was mud-walled and guarded by half a dozen sentries. With a screeching of hinges the courtyard gate was opened. The wagon was driven inside and the gate closed.

"Headquarters," said General Tang as he dismounted. "Now you and civilian person have sweet luck to view great Marshal Chen, if not too business."

SOLDIERS took their bridles and they entered the two-story building. Off the entrance, clerks occupied the long sleeping platform. They sat at school desks too small for them, writing with pens. One man had a battered typewriter, but seemed to have taken a dislike to it. Evidently modern, educated young China was not represented here. The room was fairly well lighted by dozens of candles.

They waited about fifteen minutes. Night fell. The clerks blew out their candles and departed. They were all in uniform, Brice noted. At length a door at the end of the hall opened and a wizened Chinese beckoned to General Tang Li Woo. The general waved for Brice to precede him.

Marshal Chen was seated behind a desk, and made no attempt to rise when Brice strode in. They stared at each other. Even seated, the military representative of the Central Government was a tall, heavy man. He had a shock of stiff, black hair, bright little pig eyes, like onyx, a heavy nose and a small, tight mouth in a fat, expressionless face. Brice distrusted him on sight.

At length the Marshal nodded. Brice answered with a stiff, military salute. This brought a smile to the cruel mouth, a smile of faint irony. The Marshal shook hands with himself. Brice did the same and smiled guilelessly.

Marshal Chen spoke in a deep voice, ordering the guest to be seated and the gold to be brought in. Chang sat down. Brice waited uncertainly until Chang translated the invitation. General Tang had gone out quickly, for the gold.

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The wizened Chinese presided over a pair of ancient, bronze scales, ancient weights and a little modern rack of reagents. One by one the cases were brought in, opened under the Marshal's hard eyes by sweating soldiers, and the gold taken out. The wizened Chinese weighed each bar, tested it and wrote a notation with a fine brush. As each case was finished, it was repacked and nailed up. Several times, the old jeweller cut into a bar of gold at random.

At length all ten cases stood piled up as before, with their lids nailed securely. The old jeweller spoke rapidly to Chang, his phrases too technical for Brice to grasp.

In Chang's answer, Brice caught the words: "Present United States standard—thirty-five dollars to the fine ounce—which says two thousand, three hundred, eighty pounds, *and* eleven ounces make one million dollars United States gold."

They wrangled off into Chinese weights. Finally the old jeweller did some more figuring, then announced the gold satisfactory, the weight correct.

Marshal Chen opened a drawer and took from it a casket of gold and white jade, intricately carved. From this he lifted an inch-high figure of the Buddha, still sharply carved. It was brilliant green, shimmering with emerald fire.

"Tell him," growled the Marshal in Chinese, "that he may have this now *and* the casket. It is the emerald Buddha."

V

BRICE looked uncomprehending until General Tang said, "Great Marshal Chen speak that sacred Buddha now yours and assigns forever, also very fine jade-and-gold holy casket, too!" The general added in a rather sing-song voice, "Speaks like so—Oh, great big heart, I think."

Brice rose and saluted, doubting the great big heart and wondering where Tang had learned that "assigns forever" stuff. Marshal Chen had replaced the emerald. Brice picked up the casket, took out the Buddha and handed it to Chang Wo, at the same time addressing General Tang.

"Please explain to great big Marshal," he begged gravely, "that no rudeness or doubt word here. His jeweller inspect gold. My jeweller inspect emerald. All just polite business to come before listen to learned words of Marshal."

General Tang looked slightly fogged, but made a fair stab at translating his meaning, as Brice heard.

Chang Wo held out the little Buddha with reverence and spoke gravely, "This are real emerald, very beautiful, so valuable as cannot say. Also great historic value. As to carving, that work of loving master, and also—"

"Thanks," said Brice smoothly. "I'm satisfied if it's genuine, Chang." He replaced the emerald and put the casket under his arm, leaving it open a little until he could master the intricate-looking lock.

"Ah, now," smiled General Tang, one wary eye on the marshal, "this general himself lead you to plivate—private room. All safe there with special guard of honor. Sweet to dine in one hour. Meantime not to go outside hotel, please, for own safe-keeping. You go first of me, please—"

"Wait!" interrupted the marshal in brusk Chinese. "Fu Yen, my thanks. Take your aged weights and go. As for you," he eyed Chang, "get out from here with well-advised speed, O civilian who dares sit in the presence of power!"

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Chang rose with calm dignity and said to Brice in English: "Marshal Chen desires that I depart from you."

Brice looked surprised. "Courageous General," he said politely, "ask great big Marshal why he dismiss Chang Wo, who is my friend, and place Chang Wo out of safe-keeping."

After a swift exchange with the marshal, General Tang replied woodenly, "Chang Wo not guest like you. Chang Wo can eat in town or run—return back to ship if like so. Only brave American honored guest."

Brice repressed a smile. Marshal Chen had actually said, "Kick the Chinese out. Authority likes not his looks. The foreigner stays here. Waste no more words."

Before Brice could protest, Chang spoke to General Tang in Chinese, "Kindly thank large-minded Marshal for allowing this humble jeweller to depart. It is better so." To Brice, he added in English, "Have not fear for me. I go with hope to see you in good health before long time." And with that veiled warning, he bowed and went out.

"Let the American dog wait here!" ordered Marshal Chen with an ugly stare at his general. "Have men repack the gold in the wagon and remove it to my tent in camp. Double my personal guard over it. Give these orders and return!"

General Tang saluted and spoke rapidly to Brice. "Please to wait here. Important orders—" He went out.

BRICE had not twitched a muscle at being called an "American dog." He stared absently about the room. A large map of Shensi and Kansu Provinces hung on the wall. To his trained eye the present pins and older lines revealed steady retreats by Chen's forces to escape encircling movements.

The marshal had not looked up. Yet he rose like a great cat and turned the map with its face to the wall.

Brice gave no sign. He had judged the Nationalist trenches about twenty miles to the north now. The distance looked about a quarter of the distance east to the Hwang-Ho, which was eighty miles. In view of that steady retreat, he wondered why he had seen no trenches or gun emplacements on this south bank of the Wei-Ho—an ideal position to defend.

Marshal Chen looked up and bellowed for his orderly. A young Chinese officer popped in from a side room and saluted. "Great Marshal desires?"

"Await General Tang in your room. Ask him name and description of Shanghai jeweller who just left here. Then find that man. Watch him. Note where he goes and with whom he talks. Do not let him escape from Singan-Fu. Go."

The officer saluted and obeyed. Almost at once General Tang entered with a captain and a squad of soldiers. These began lugging out the cases of gold. The captain directed operations in a hushed voice, with slightly nervous glances at Marshal Chen.

"Please step into next room, General Tang," ordered the marshal in Chinese. "And shut the door."

Tang went out. After a few minutes he returned, and smiled mechanically at Brice. "Now have sweet time for show honored guest where living tonight," he said. "Please not angering at slowness, and to step like this before I do." He indicated the door into the hall.

With a bow to Marshal Chen which was grimly returned, Brice entered the hall. General Tang followed and closed

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the door, indicating a ladder to the upper floor.

"Noble Marshal Chen bear heavy lump on shoulder," he apologized indirectly. "This stair, please. I feeling great honor visit from gentle soldier of America. I hearing of you from this man, that man, so most distinguished!"

Brice felt a chill down his spine. If Tang knew that he spoke Chinese, which most of his friends did know—but it wasn't likely. Neither Chen nor Tang had looked at his face, when Marshal Chen called him an American dog. He rather liked General Tang, and sensed the feeling returned. He did not think the general would play cat and mouse with him, pretending not to know that he spoke Chinese.

"I feel greatly honored to know General Tang Li Woo," he said, "who are brave man. I will not foolishly take emerald Buddha to dinner. So will General Tang order sentry keep wide-awake eyes on my room?"

They had climbed the ladder and approached a room at the end of the hall, guarded by an armed sentry. As this man saluted and flung open the door, General Tang addressed him stiffly in Chinese.

"Honored guest will reside here. In his absence, this general desires that you keep guard on his possessions. Let no one enter—except the greatest—" As the soldier saluted, General Tang added to Brice, "Unlucky I must ride to camp to safeguarding of gold for Marshal Chen. Dinner not long. I hoping to prance back pretty soon. So, meantime, saying pleasant cheerio to honored guest."

After a suitable reply, Brice entered the room and closed the door. Luckily it was solid. First he looked to his weapons, an obvious .45 in a holster and a .32 automatic in his side pocket. Both were in good order and loaded.

HE went to the window, which was neither glazed nor barred. It was perhaps fourteen feet above the ground, but there were plenty of blankets in the room.

Smiling faintly, he sat down on the cot and began handling the gold-and-jade casket. It did not take him long to solve the intricate mechanism that locked it, for Chinese puzzles had always amused and interested him.

Finally, he locked it, pushed it into a dark corner under the military cot, and sat down to wait. Already he could see himself, dressed in the sentry's uniform, and sliding out that window into the void. With the sentry's cap pulled low over his black eyes and a bandage across his face, he could pass almost anywhere as a Chinese.

In a very short time the sentry knocked, opened the door and beckoned. When Brice emerged, the man saluted and pointed through an open door into a larger room.

Brice went in, to find the marshal already seated, cross-legged at a long, low table. He had his mouth full and merely waved at the place opposite. Brice sat down.

Three places were set, the empty one no doubt for General Tang. Uniformed orderlies served the meal. There were also three cute, soft-footed little Chinese girls of ten years or so. One stood against the wall, one close to Brice, the third at Marshal Chen's elbow. After a moment Brice realized that all three little girls were frightened and trying hard not to show it. When he smiled at the girl beside him, she flinched and dropped her slant eyes quickly.

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The dinner was excellent, the chopsticks an old story to Brice. For obvious reasons there was no conversation. In any case, Marshal Chen seemed preoccupied. He smoked incessantly through the meal, the child at his side refilling his tiny-bowled pipe about every two minutes.

Once fright made her clumsy and she spilled a few grains of tobacco. As Chen accepted the pipe, he flipped the back of her little hand viciously. The child's eyes filled with tears, but she did not change her expression.

Brice had no high opinion of the marshal, but it fell a couple of long notches at this exhibition. The girl saw the rage in his eyes and shook in her little sandals.

The meal was almost finished when the door banged open and General Tang entered with two soldiers at his heels. Chen turned with a savage scowl, but the general was tense.

"Noble leader," he panted in Chinese, "this person comes with evil tidings! The cases arrived at your tent, so were placed in the care of personal guard. But this person noticed one case insecurely fastened. Great Marshal, that case held nothing but sand! This horrified person took the liberty to open three, nay, four other cases! All, all are filled with sand! How is it possible? General Tang brings sergeant and corporal of guard for you to question—"

Marshal Chen rose to his feet, sweeping the child aside so that she fell in a whimpering sprawl.

"What is that you say?" he muttered, advancing on the two soldiers. "Explain, before the skin is stripped from your backs. Explain, sons of mangy dogs!"

"High-born Marshal," faltered the sergeant, "one came to us, saying the wagon stood under guard at the edge of camp. Your servants hastened to it at once. There was no guard. The wagon stood unattended, but with the ten cases in it. So were these conducted to your noble tent—"

An officer slipped into the room and saluted.

"Liars!" Chen turned the glare of his pig eyes on the newcomer. "Well, Captain? You dare intrude?"

"Let instant tidings excuse the fault, high-born leader!" said the captain briskly. "Under cover of darkness, the pushing boat has just slipped away downstream."

The pig eyes came slowly to rest on Brice. "Now," muttered Chen, "do we know what became of the gold!"

VI

BRICE had been staring from face to face without a sign of comprehension. Now he returned Chen's stare blankly.

"Exalted leader," General Tang interposed, "how can it be the fault of this white man? Has he left the building?"

"Fool!" the marshal snarled. "Must *he* leave, for the execution of his plans? It was only because the Goddess of Luck was kind that you discovered the sand before this dog could depart with the—payment! Find my orderly!"

General Tang sent the captain on this errand, his face stern. "How, great Marshal," he asked, "could the white man be involved in this plot? He was here. Also, he is known in the mouths of our own countrymen as one who keeps his word. So much has reached my ears—"

"Twice fool!" snarled Marshal Chen. "It was through the Chinese

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jeweller and the other white dogs. A clever plan! Yet the pushing boat will not go far without the leader. On the morrow we find and destroy it, first yielding up this dog in shreds and tatters to his kind—"

The captain entered with the young *aide-de-camp* from the room below, who saluted and burst into speech, "Greatest Commander, this person has but now returned for orders. The Shanghai jeweller turned south from Headquarters and vanished! He has not been seen in the streets. He has not presented his face at any gate. So much could be learned in short time—"

"Take men and find him! Bring him to my tent within the hour—if you value your ears!" muttered Chen. He began to pace up and down in a black rage.

"What is it?" Brice asked General Tang politely. "I see the Marshal is upset. Has the enemy broken through?"

Chen wheeled furiously. "What says the white dog?"

"He says," replied Tang with a hint of disdain, "that you seem disturbed. He asks whether the enemy has broken us."

"Clever dog! He knows why I am disturbed!"

"Even the greatest commander needs faithful friends," said General Tang quietly. "Twice now has the Marshal used the word fool to his friend. Because this person remains your friend, he would recommend cooler thinking. The wagon was left on the edge of camp, *entirely* unguarded. Does a jeweller from Shanghai—do unknown white men—command the troops of Marshal Chen? Can they drive away or kill that guard of eight men *without disturbance?* Surely such a plot lies deeper! It is my thought that our guest knows nothing of it."

Chen's temper lessened. Craft glimmered in his pig eyes. "Bring in the sentry from the end of the hall here!"

The captain went out and returned with the sentry.

"Simple low-born," purred the Marshal. "Has this white man left his room—with a certain casket?"

"Heaven-born leader," faltered the sentry," he came to the room with the great General Tang and a casket. Since then he came out only once, lacking the casket, to enter the Celestial Presence here for the evening meal—"

"Well-spoken. Go." As the man blundered out, the marshal added, "Captain, go to the room of this *noble* white man and find a casket of jade and gold. Then order me four horses and return here with the casket, keeping it hidden beneath your cloak. The four present will ride to camp to make kindly investigation into this matter!"

AS he was not supposed to understand Chinese, Brice made no protest. When the captain went out, Marshal Chen resumed his place at the table and left them standing.

"My pipe, little toad! On the instant!" he growled.

The child had been shrinking against the wall. She ran forward, filled the pipe with shaking little hands, presented it and lighted a paper quill. But her fingers shook so that she could not hold the paper steady.

Chen caught her hand and steadied it, lighted his pipe and then squeezed the small fingers until she gasped with pain. Then he laughed and flung her hand aside.

"Son of a camel," murmured Brice dreamily.

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Tang heard and started slightly, but held his peace. The captain entered, something bulky under his arm and hidden by his cloak. "Horses are ready, Most Exalted Commander," he announced. "Four swift horses."

A few minutes later they were all trotting north. They passed through the north gate and set their horses at a dead run for the reserve camp two miles north over the plain. At least the Marshal could ride, as could the other Chinese.

When they slowed a little, General Tang rode close to Brice and explained what had happened. He did not mention the casket, merely describing the loss of the gold. Then he asked, "Will honorable visitor explaining to me why pushing boat go down river, when honorable visitor saying repairs?"

"Has it gone downstream?" asked Brice carelessly. "No doubt my men wished to test the engines. It will come back. But the loss of the gold is a serious matter for the Marshal. There must be traitors in his camp, I think."

"Perhaps a serious matter for *you*," whispered Tang.

They whirled into the dimly lighted camp, raced between the patched little tents and pulled up before a large marquee. The Marshal dismounted and strode in, the others at his heels. Brice had no thought of escape as things were.

In the marquee were gathered, as he discovered, the Marshal's personal guard and the one man who had been sent to the marquee to say the wagon had arrived outside the camp. It was this man whom Chen questioned first.

The soldier stammered out his tale. He had left the sergeant and the rest of the escort with the wagon at the edge of camp. The sergeant had sent him to report its arrival. He did not ask why the wagon was not driven straight to the marquee. He obeyed orders, and returned with the personal guard.

Yes, they had found the wagon and the cases, but the entire escort had vanished including the sergeant. Not knowing what else to do, he had returned with the personal guard and helped unload the cases. Then had come the great General Tang and found the cases full of sand. That was all he knew. The dragon-sired Marshal Chen was his father and his mother, and he was a lost dog—

The inference tickled Brice in spite of his sense of danger. Marshal Chen strode to the cases, four of which spewed white sand. "Smash these!" he gasped in a black rage.

Brice intervened, catching General Tang by the arm and stooping over the unbroken cases. Then he stood.

"These are not the same cases, high General Tang. The words are the same, but the others were painted. These are stencilled—" He pointed out the small breaks in the lettering. "They contained real ammunition!"

WHEN he understood, Tang nodded quickly, then translated, adding that he, too, had noticed the solid lettering.

It was evident from Chen's scowl that he remembered the solid lettering on the cases of gold. He faced the soldier. "A hundred lashes may prod your memory. Seize him!"

The man groveled. "Nay, Heaven-Born!" he howled. "The sergeant sent me! It is only the truth!"

"If this be the *only* loyal man?" whispered Tang.

"Free him!" raved Chen. "Search the camp for that escort—also the driver of the gold!"

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One of the personal guard ventured forward. "That was done at once, Greatness, at the general's orders. Through the camp like a great wind rode your guard. The escort and the driver have escaped—fled, no man knows whither!"

"All but this one man," said Tang, and went out.

"Break open these other cases!" snarled Marshal Chen. It was done swiftly. All contained sand.

The sergeant and corporal of the personal guard rode up, dismounted and entered. On their heels came General Tang.

"It is not the same wagon," he announced calmly. "That other was stained with blood from the meat ration. This one is unstained. A clever, far-reaching plot, Noble Leader."

"Then where is the driver of *this* wagon?" raved Chen.

"He too, fled, no man suspecting," ventured the same guard. "It was while your men unloaded the cases, Great One."

The Marshal looked down, fighting his temper. "Go forth, take more men, and seek them on the plain *now*—all save two of my guards," he muttered.

As all except two of them filed out he faced Brice. "Now tell this white dog," he said hoarsely, "that he has tricked us! Say to him that until he returns the gold this person will hold the—payment—as security."

When this was translated, Brice shook his head. "Say to the great big marshal that I played no trick. How was it possible? I am a stranger, and remained at Headquarters."

Chen listened to the answer as Tang translated. In fuming impatience he retorted, "Tell him the sale was not completed. Therefore, the payment is still mine to keep."

As soon as General Tang had battled to put this in English, Brice said gravely: "The sale *was* completed—the gold out of my hands and placed in his *before* he lost it."

The general translated this, listened to the furious answer, and told Brice woodenly, "Important Marshal say not."

"Then tell him," said Brice with cool patience, "that good idea for great big Marshal himself to exchange cases, keep gold and demand return of emerald Buddha!"

General Tang started and gave him a warning glance. Chen would lose caste with his army if they knew he had sold abroad the sacred emerald Buddha. The general translated his answer, using the word payment instead of emerald Buddha.

Marshal Chen's face darkened. Instead of raging he grew dangerously calm. "Enough. Tell the white dog to yield his arms. And you, Captain, give me the casket."

For an instant, before the words were translated, Brice thought of fighting it out, although he did not move. But the guards had swung their rifles to threaten him. And the captain had drawn his revolver. Tang slowly translated.

Brice drew his .45 and handed it butt first to one of the guards. After a brief hesitation he produced his .32 automatic and gave that up also. "Is Marshal Chen neither man of honor *nor* trustworthy host?" he inquired.

General Tang scowled, but did not translate this.

"Begone!" Chen ordered the guards. As they hurried out, he snarled, "Watch this dog with your revolver, Captain, lest he snap. In spite of the arguments of a trapped thief, your commander will have the gold *or* the

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emerald! When the gold is returned, then will the emerald be restored him."

The general translated this, omitting the word "thief." At the same time, Chen accepted the jade-and-gold casket and easily unlocked it. With triumphant greed he felt inside the casket. He stiffened. Then his hand came out—empty.

VII

PIG eyes insane with rage, Chen moved toward Brice. When Brice did not stir, he paused and controlled himself.

"Ask him what he has done with the emerald Buddha!" he snarled hoarsely at Tang. "Ask him, fool!"

The captain was staring, horrified at the mention of the emerald Buddha. General Tang had stiffened with indignation. In a harsh voice he translated the question.

Brice shrugged with open contempt. "I myself put the emerald in the casket. Supposing that Marshal Chen was a man of honor, I left the casket in my room. I have not seen it again. So much can be proved by my guard, unless he lies! The plot is now clear. I think that only Marshal Chen himself knows where the emerald Buddha is."

General Tang hesitated, looking startled and rather appalled. He translated the speech as follows, "O Marshal who has thrice called his friend a fool, the white man says that he placed the emerald in the casket. That casket he left in his room. He has not returned to it. So said his guard. If it is not in the casket, he does not know—"

"Guards!" bellowed Chen with unleashed fury. As they rushed in, he pointed, "Strip this white dog!"

Unmoved, Brice permitted himself to be stripped. He was stark naked when the guards stepped back at last.

Chen pawed minutely through his clothes. Then he got up, a shade of uncertainty in his little eyes.

"Let him dress," he growled at General Tang. "For this night he lies bound, that he may decide to speak on the morrow. If not, the frightened rat may oil his tongue."

Brice dressed in silence. The guards bound him, wrists and ankles, ingeniously. After translating the order to dress, General Tang had started to speak, but refrained. Brice understood. The general's career was at stake.

The guards lifted Brice, carried him into a small, adjoining tent that was dimly lighted and flung him down. As they left, he heard Chen roar, "Now strip this captain!"

Brice started at once to fight his bonds with cool patience. They were tight and secure. Yet they *must* yield before morning. He had seen that torture. A caged rat is placed on the victim's naked stomach. The bottom of the cage is removed, leaving the rat still caged, but on the victim's flesh. Then fire is brought close to the rat and the frightened animal tries to dig its way out—

Hours passed. Though streaming with sweat, Brice had made no progress with his wrists. His ankles were looser, but he could not reach them. He paused to rest, with a grim sigh of fatigue. This looked like the last tight spot.

A movement of the tent flap caught his eye. The canvas wavered an instant, then was thrust viciously aside. A Chinese soldier crept into the tent, forage cap pulled low over his eyes. He was grasping a long, bright knife.

Under the dim lantern glow, shadowed onyx eyes came to rest on Brice.

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Instantly the soldier sprang at him. Brice had no time to do more than roll clear over on his face again, to avoid the knife. Weight pinned his legs. He tried to swerve, biting his lip for the plunging stroke in his heart. In a lightning flash he guessed that Marshal Chen dared not wait until morning—

A hand pinned his arm and pain stung his wrist. He stiffened, then relaxed with a stifled gasp. An instant later the ropes fell away from his wrists.

HE writhed on his back, easing the soldier to the ground. The forage cap tumbled off. A fan of soft, dark hair shrouded the military uniform.

"It is you, Mei-ling?" Brice gasped hoarsely in Chinese. "So the small red lily is a friend?"

"Oh, kind one!" whispered the girl as she sawed at his ankle bonds. "This female person is so happy that you know our tongue! Now can your escape be more readily contrived."

Brice lay silent, breathing deep, until he was free. Death had seemed very close. At last he rose and flexed sore muscles. The girl had run to whisper with someone outside.

When she turned back, he caught her arm gently. "My gratitude, Mei-ling! The men of Chen's guard have my weapons. Can they be found? Only two men were left. The others went scouring the plains for the—gold escort."

At this moment the uniform of a Chinese soldier was flung into the tent. The girl turned her back, ran to the entrance and whispered again. Brice stripped to the waist and put on the uniform, keeping his whipcord breeches, shining putties and shoes. He did not relish buying new ones, and the tunic with its big Chinese characters, hid most of them.

"Ready, Mei-ling," he whispered in Chinese.

She turned at once. "Wait. He is seeking your two weapons. Where is the emerald Buddha?"

"Also in the hands of the enemy, kind-hearted lily, since *you* took the gold."

"Oh, clever white—" She paused in faint confusion.

"White devil?" he murmured, laughing. "What matter? You have saved the white devil's life. Who seeks my weapons, small red lily—Chang Wo, perhaps?"

"Again clever," she murmured. "This female person did not know that you understood our tongue—"

Two guns were dropped in the tent. Brice caught them up. They were his own. He had kept his holster under the uniform. This took the .45. He slipped the .32 in his breeches.

"Come," she whispered. "There is no time to regain the emerald Buddha now. Chang and one other wait with horses."

She left the tent warily, Brice at her heels. He followed her through the sleeping camp. They passed a sentry at arm's length. He yawned and looked the other way. At a hundred yards from the camp, the vague outline of horses and two men loomed suddenly close in the starlight.

One of the men was Chang Wo. As they drew still nearer, Brice saw that Chang's companion was a wild-looking Tartar, with a sheepskin coat, a rifle slung over his shoulder and bandy legs shrouded in rags.

Brice shook hands with himself. "The jeweler from Shanghai," he chuckled dryly. "Whither do we ride?"

"It is almost the dawn," said Mei-

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ling with a quaint air of command. "We walk our horses—southward."

As they all mounted, Brice rode up beside her, and spoke in Chinese. "The pushing boat waits about twenty-five *li* (ten miles) toward the rising sun, Mei-ling."

"That is known to me, white devil," she whispered demurely. "Also this has reached my ears. Loyal troops of Chen have been scattered along the Wei-Ho to the Hwang-Ho, to discover and watch that pushing boat. Yet this female person thinks they will be withdrawn—before many hours."

Brice started to ask why, but she interrupted him.

"Something else has reached these ears. At highest sun today, a plane landed in the fields about twelve *li* to the south of Singan-Fu. It waited one hour. Then it rose and found a hiding place in the mountains. It is still there. The pilot has not been disturbed. Will he return—for you?"

"Clever, Mei-ling! This white devil hopes so. Now tell me how you—obtained the gold with such smoothness."

"As you know," she murmured, "this female person loves China and the Nationalist cause. So also does Chang Wo. He sent word to me of the gold before you started. So did this female person wait and swim out to you and tell you a story—"

BRICE chuckled at the double meaning in both languages, but did not interrupt. She ignored his amusement.

"You were kind and had pity. This female person returned your kindness with treachery, but the Cause *needed* that gold! She measured and studied the cases of gold. As General Tang came on the pushing boat last night, this female person slipped into the water and swam ashore without noise."

"But into the very center of your enemies?"

"You do not understand. Of Chen's army at the front at least one tenth are in sympathy with us. Here, among the reserve troops whom he cannot trust, almost half are friends. You saw that sentry look the other way. Last night, disguised in uniform, this female person and some others had more than twelve hours to find similar cases to load with sand, and a similar wagon —also to be sure of the escort. The rest you must know."

"And your hands?" he muttered. "*You* did that?"

"It was so little—for the Cause. Think of my—brother. My feet betrayed me. You were too kind to—ask."

"It comes to me," said Brice in grave Chinese, "that Mei-ling is a brave and splendid maiden."

"You—do not ask about the gold," she breathed hurriedly. "That is even now upon the backs of horses, plodding far and safe through the mountains on the way to our armies. Yet this female person had betrayed your kindness. Therefore, she and this one other rode back to help Chang Wo save you. Oh, brave white soldier, you have lost the gold. Ride with us, fight with us, to free China!"

Brice hesitated. "Mei-ling," he whispered, "is brave. Would Mei-ling run away—because she had failed?"

"Not so," the girl admitted sadly. "Then, as you cannot ride with us, shall we guide you to the plane now, or later to the pushing boat, kind white devil?"

Brice laughed to hide the tenderness in his voice. "You and your escort must ride for safety now, Mei-ling.

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Chang Wo and this person will meet the plane. No, it will hold only one and the pilot. Does Chang Wo ride with you?"

"He cannot. He must return to Shanghai. Nor will that serve. Only this female person knows where the plane is. And she would—know that you are safe—"

Brice turned, but the girl had averted her face. "Then—if Chang left us to find the pushing boat," he said, "Chang could return on it, if this person gave him a writing."

"Let it be so—after we find the plane."

They walked their horses in silence a while, hushed by the fresh, pale wonder of dawn perhaps. As the sun rose, Mei-ling changed their course for the house of a farmer. There they bought sour goat's milk and disks of unleavened bread, one of them always on watch. Over the meal Brice spoke.

"The horses are weary, Mei-ling," he said. "If it is far to where the plane is hidden, shall we remain here a while, rest the horses, and then ride for the landing place, to meet the plane at highest sun?"

"This female person," smiled Mei-ling, "yields to the greater wisdom of a soldier. Let us wait—and watch."

Brice laughed. "It was as well that Marshal Chen did not catch this wise soldier last night."

"He had gone away," said Mei-ling thoughtfully.

"Taking his two guards," smiled Chang Wo.

Brice scowled. "This person hopes that he was not in Singan-Fu, tormenting little frightened children!"

"Not so," murmured the Shanghai jeweller. He drew a long, bright knife from his sleeve and inspected both sides of it. Finding two small, dark blots he scratched them off with his fingernail. "Marshal Chen," he added politely, "was unloved in China. Oh, wiser to join his ancestors—"

Chang Wo smiled and put away the knife.

VIII

THEY rode away from the farm at about eleven, and reached the landing place before noon. Here they were in the middle of a huge, open valley and visible for miles. There was no sign of the plane as yet.

Waiting quietly while his horse grazed, Brice saw a spreading plume of dust to the north. The Tartar horseman noticed it at the same time and pointed with a guttural cry.

"Ride, while we hold them off!" Brice urged the girl. The moving dot that made the plume was taking form of horsemen, riding like the wind. About twenty men, Brice judged.

"No," said Mei-ling calmly. "And of what use? They have fresh horses. Ours are weary, lacking sleep. There is no hiding-place." She gazed at the oncoming horsemen.

"This person says to ride—" began Brice roughly.

A drone in the sky grew suddenly louder as a plane floated into view over the hills to the south. Brice stared from the plane to horsemen. He could not tell which would reach them first. It would be close— He drew out his .45.

"Now," cried the girl, "*you* will be safe! Useless for us to ride. We fight, and die if the gods will."

"Then dismount and shelter behind your horses," said Brice coolly, though he was raging at this Chinese fatalism.

The girl obeyed. The Tartar followed, then Chang. The plane engine grew to a roar, and softened as the pilot dipped for a landing. Still

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mounted, Brice stared between relief and disgust. The plane carried twin Lewis guns synchronized to fire through the prop. And the pilot had come down instead of straffing those horsemen from the air.

Brice studied the horsemen. If they rode straight in for the kill, he could make it.

"The fast-shooting rifles will save you," he told Mei-ling, then wheeled his horse and rode to converge with the taxiing plane. Almost there, his horse went mad with fear. Brice dismounted and ran to the plane. He flung his .45 into the cockpit and was about to climb in when he looked back.

The troop of horsemen were slowing to dismount and kill at long range. The Tartar had unlimbered his rifle. The girl and Chang stood calmly motionless.

Brice gave the pilot swift orders, then turned and ran for the girl. There was no time. A chance shot might bring her down. Behind him, the plane roared and gathered speed.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw it take off.

With only one rifle against them, the horsemen had changed their minds and were riding closer. Already they had begun to fire from the saddle. The Tartar's horse reared with a scream like a woman, then bolted. The others followed.

"Down! Lie down!" yelled Brice in Chinese. "Face to the earth, Mei-ling!"

A hundred feet away from them, he saw the girl obey. The Tartar dropped to one knee and leveled his rifle. Then he dropped it, fell sideways and curled in a ball—

Hot lead nicked Brice in the ribs as he ran.

These men could shoot. Where was that plane—

BRICE saw Chang Wo stoop for the Tartar's rifle. His hand closed on it. Then he lay down and rolled slowly on his back, to stare at the sky. At the same instant Brice reached the girl and plunged in front of her, flat on his stomach.

A bullet stung his shoulder lightly. Then the troop ceased firing and rode in wildly to take them alive or bayonet them.

Brice snatched for the rifle, aimed quickly and emptied a saddle. From the sky came a rising whine and the clatter of Lewis guns as the plane swooped. Under the double hail of lead, nine or ten of the close-packed horsemen pitched to the ground. The plane flashed over, zoomed, wheeled on one wing tip slowly, a blinding thing in the sun.

With screams and yells the horsemen fled west for their lives, most of their horses almost unmanageable. Brice aimed the repeating rifle steadily and thrust another man from his horse. One lone rider had swung to the east. He came drumming at Brice and fired from the saddle. Brice felt the rifle spring apart in his numbed hands. The horseman yelled, spurring to ride him down. He dragged the little .32 from his pocket, but kept it hidden and remained erect. At twenty feet the grinning Chinese leveled his rifle and bayonet. Mei-ling gasped faintly. Brice raised the automatic and shot the horseman three times through the chest.

The dying man jerked in his horse. His rifle dropped and stuck in the earth. Brice leaped for the swinging reins, fought the horse to a standstill, and turned.

Three more of the distant, scattered horsemen were down. The others had checked to fire at the zooming plane.

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The men of Chen's bodyguard were hand-picked. The plane staggered, leveled off, then climbed steadily. At least the pilot was not badly hurt, nor the plane much injured.

Brice discovered the girl at his side. "Both," she murmured gravely, "both have joined their ancestors."

Her voice was hushed and very solemn; her almond eyes were grave.

"Wait here—" With only a glance at Chang Wo and the Tartar, Brice swung into the saddle. Riderless mounts were trotting in circles, frightened and bewildered. By quick, neat horsemanship, he intercepted one animal, caught the reins and trotted back with it to Mei-ling. The five remaining horsemen in the distance were galloping toward them again.

"Mount quickly and we escape," he told the girl.

She managed to haul herself into the vacant saddle.

"Ride east, for the pushing boat," he smiled. "These horses are as fresh as theirs!" Wanting the girl in front of him, he added craftily: "Can you show me the way, Mei-ling?"

She broke into a canter at once. Brice rode at her stirrup, between her and the horsemen.

"The white devil came back and saved Mei-ling," she tossed over her shoulder, "though Mei-ling stole his gold!"

Brice looked back. The horsemen were no closer. "Mei-ling saved the white devil's life," he chuckled. "White devils are not as bad as blue or green ones."

"That is very true. This female person does not understand why the plane did not return and kill them all."

"The pilot was hurt—and wise not to risk more."

"So also," gasped Mei-ling, "is the white devil hurt. Yet he risked more—"

Her tone was full of effort.

BRICE glanced down uncomfortably at the small red stains at his shoulder and ribs. Suddenly he tore off the uniform, waved it over his head and flung it behind him, controlling his startled horse. No knowing what he might catch from the dead guard's uniform, and the sun was warm.

Faint yells from behind answered the derisive act. Again he looked down, riding naked to the waist. The wounds were very slight, and still bleeding. This made the risk of infection a slight one. Mei-ling glanced at his hurts, and smiled, "No doubt the Goddess of Luck is a friend."

He laughed. "No doubt, small red lily! Why do we direct ourselves eastward and not even a little to the north?"

"Because the Wei-Ho bends to the south not far below Singan-Fu. We ride straight for the pushing boat, lest they cut us off. If the boat waits twenty-five *li* below the city, it is not more than twenty *li* from us. The land is good."

Eight miles, thought Brice. We can do that on our heads, unless *she* tires. Mei-ling rode well but not expertly.

"Now we rest the horses," he said, "by walking. Our pursuers have not gained. Let them tire their mounts." He grinned down at the little automatic before pocketing it.

By judicious walking or galloping, Brice managed to keep out of rifle shot without exhausting Mei-ling. The ground was open plain, neither marshy nor fenced. And being off the road they encountered no soldiers nor anyone else.

At last they converged on the Wei-

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Ho, and saw the river where it bent again toward the north. A moment later Brice saw the tug. He gave a shrill whistle, beginning on a low note to spare the nerves of their horses.

The distant figures of Sam and Tiny appeared on deck. Brice waved his arm and pointed behind him. The two men unshipped the dinghy. Sam tumbled into it. Tiny raced for the bows and the quick-firer, stripping off the tarpaulin.

"Walk!" said Brice grimly. "Let them ride nearer."

Mei-ling obeyed. He saw that she was pale and drawn with fatigue. From behind came the drumming of racing horses.

As they looked back, a shell *whinked* over their heads and burst just in front of the horsemen. They pulled up and tried to wheel, yelling with rage. As they milled for an instant another shell dropped squarely among them, killing two men. The others rode for their lives, their horses unharmed.

Five minutes later, Brice lifted the weary Mei-ling aboard the tug. After the first greeting, Tiny began to ask questions. Sam kicked him as usual and dragged him aft.

Mei-ling gave Brice her hand. He turned it and kissed the bruised palm. She withdrew it slowly.

"My grateful thoughts always, kind white devil," she said, looking down. "It is in my heart to regret that you failed. Yet the emerald Buddha belongs to China. The next task of Mei-ling will be to recover it from Chen's camp. No doubt General Tang has it now?"

She looked up quickly.

Brice shook his head. "You have the gold, small red lily who loves—China. Do not go back to the camp of your enemies. The emerald Buddha is nearing Shanghai in the plane. It is in my heart to regret that, and other things."

"In the plane?" she whispered. "In the *plane?*"

He nodded. "Hidden in the butt of my revolver. We each had our task. You are very lovely, Mei-ling."

"It is—Fate." The girl looked into his eyes. "If China were free, there would be room in my heart also—for other things. Will you place me on shore where we first met? This female person has friends there, and can rest in safety. Then she goes north to use the gold, for China. Yet think of Mei-ling as not—altogether happy."

She turned and peered north, toward the mutter of distant guns.

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King Colt

By LUKE SHORT

COSMOS was a tough county. Cosmos Town was tougher. Cattlemen were harried by rustlers, murders were committed and forgotten to make way for more murders. The law under slack, easy-going Sheriff Baily Blue and his young, big-boned, too-amiable deputy, Johnny Hendry, was a mockery.

Picket-Stake Hendry, the old-time prospector who'd reared Johnny as his own son, worried about it some. Worried about Johnny—wondered if the stuff was really in the lad. But Johnny had his own point of view about it.

"You never went to the law in your life," he told Picket-Stake a hundred times. "No *man* does. As long as women and kids is safe, let the man who can fight the most and shoot the best win."

And Picket-Stake would snap back, "Force is only for them that know when not to use it."

That always made Johnny grin. "That's me," he'd say. "That's what I been tryin' to tell you. Crowd a peaceful man and you got a killin' slated." And Picket-Stake never had an answer for that.

JOHNNY HENDRY did feel crowded, though, the day that Pick's body was brought in, the head blown off by a double-barreled shotgun. There was some gold on Johnny's burros, but the location papers couldn't be found—and so the motive for the bush-whacking was plain enough. You couldn't recognize old Pick's face at all.

The reason for that was that it wasn't old Pick's face. Old Pick wasn't the man who was dead—but one of the two dry-gulchers who had trailed him across the desert. Eager to protect the rich strike he had just made, Pick had played a fox's game—and when his two trailers separated, Pick had shot first.

But Pick stayed dead because he wanted to see what Johnny Hendry would do. If Johnny wasn't what old Pick hoped he was, the gold he'd found after a lifetime of prospecting could go hang. That was the way he felt.

AND Pick's hunch turns out to be right. Johnny Hendry is jolted out of his easy-going ways. So much so that

This story began in last week's Argosy

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he announces to Sheriff Blue that he is going to run for sheriff himself, come election, on a law and order ticket. Blue isn't very much bothered—nobody running on a strict down-with-crime platform has a chance in Cosmos. But Johnny thinks he has.

Chief among his supporters is the girl called Nora, to whom Johnny is used to running when anything bothers him. She always gives him sound advice which he usually disregards, and she's said a firm "No" to his six proposals. Nora has the same doubts about Johnny that have bothered Picket-Stake. But this time, she's behind him a hundred percent.

Major Fitz, the manager of the big Bar 33 ranch, agrees to help Johnny every way he can, and Johnny's chances look brighter. He can count on the ranchers who've been rustled to the verge of bankruptcy, on the Mexicans—if Blue doesn't get 'em hooched up—on the management of the Esmerella and other mining companies of the district, and upon the townspeople who are pretty tired of the saloon cowboys and easy gunmen who hang around Cosmos.

Johnny visits the respectable ranchers and they agree to send to him, individually, a list of the members of the community they'd like to see run out of town. This much accomplished, Johnny begins casting around for likely deputies. Nora suggests Fred McLain, but Johnny objects. "He's honest. He's also dumb. How long do you think he'd stack up against a handy gunman?" Nora's frown deepens as Johnny goes on. "I've got to have hard cases for deputies. They've got to be tough—and hard to kill."

TOUGHEST and hardest man to kill that Johnny can think of is burly, squat, redheaded Turk Hebron, petty cattle thief and rustler. Turk, Johnny thinks, should be tired of his penny-ante thievery, and ready for the opportunity to call the past the past.

Turk is leery at first. "If I'm elected," Johnny says, "all I aim to do is to move the badmen out of town. If they don't want to go, they got to prove they're men enough to stay. I'll expect my deputy to be honest and willin' to risk his neck if he needs to. You like a fight, Turk. How about it?"

Turk thinks it might be worth trying. But there is just one more thing. Johnny takes Turk out into the alley. "I've had a notion that if it came to a showdown, Turk, you think you could take care of me pretty easy. Try it. I'm open to conviction."

The fight is something for both of them to remember. And Johnny comes out with just enough edge to win his hard-case deputy's respect.

"Now," Johnny drawls, "all I got to do is get elected."

CHAPTER V

STRAWS IN THE WIND

IF Johnny did not set up drinks for the whole county in each of the dozen saloons for a week, he did other things designed to offset Baily Blue's whisky-buying. On the quiet, he managed to see every merchant in town and point out the advantages of a Law and Order term. To them, he promised a deputy who would act as marshal. Then he went to the mine owners and operators, and to them he promised he would stop hold-ups, or anyway cut them down to the place where insurance rates on the bullion shipments were not prohibitive. It was a busy week, but in the midst of it, he took the time to go down to Hugo Miller's assay office and talk with him.

Hugo was a quiet man, a graduate engineer, middle-aged, not given to talking much about his past. But Pick had found him thoroughly honest, and he had often spent evenings in the back of Miller's work shop talking over ores and minerals and mines, and Johnny sometimes listened. He too liked this pale, sensitive-faced man who forever had a pipe in his mouth, and who minded his own business,

Miller was working at his scales; at Johnny's entrance, he quit and

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pulled up two chairs. After a few minutes of small talk, in which Miller bitterly lamented Pick's death, Johnny said, "Did Pick have any samples with you, Hugo?"

"About ten."

"Anything good show up?"

"They weren't worthless," Hugo said carefully. "Pick knows too much about the game to lug rock down to me that isn't good. But on the other hand, they were run of the mill samples for him. They all assayed about the same."

"No one better than the others?" Johnny asked hopefully.

"We'll see," Hugo said, rising. He got his reports and glanced over them briefly. "Here's one that's better than the others. Not much, though."

Johnny's heart sank. He had hoped Hugo could show him a rich assay, something that would indicate Pick had struck it and had been murdered by claim-jumpers, but there was nothing here pointing to it.

"Know where any of these claims were located?" he asked glumly, and then he went on to explain. Surely, Pick had been murdered for his gold—it was certain that he had found gold, for some of it was found on his burros. In view of this, it was almost certain that he had the location papers on him when he was murdered. "Maybe he found this gold at a place he'd been workin' a long time. I thought maybe he'd told you of a place that looked good."

Hugo shook his head. "He never told me."

Johnny sighed. "That's out, I reckon."

"Maybe not," Hugo said quietly. "He's brought me a lot of ore to assay, Johnny. Most of it lately has been a peculiar kind of ore—what a geologist would call volcanic breccia, and my guess is that it's in a long dike, or fault. Every one of his last thirty samples has been of this ore. Maybe he struck gold in this volcanic breccia dike."

"That's a lot of help," Johnny said drily. "What do I do? Hunt the Calicos for volcanic breccia?"

"There isn't much of it," Hugo said.

"I know. But it may be only a mile long. It'd take years to find it."

"Let someone else do it for you," Hugo said calmly. Johnny was about to protest, when he closed his mouth and looked hard at Hugo. "What do you mean by that?"

Hugo took his pipe from his mouth and pointed it at Johnny. "Each one of these samples Pick has brought in is higher grade stuff than the one before it. That argues that Pick was following this breccia dike to its head, doesn't it? He was getting closer and closer to a really good thing. All right, if the man who killed him did it because Pick had something, the chances are he'll bring in this ore to be assayed. It'll have this volcanic breccia in it. And I'd know the looks of that anywhere, because in ten years of assaying for this town and the Calicos, it's the first I've run across."

Johnny turned this over in his mind. "Then if a jasper brings in some samples with volcanic breccia, you'll know it come from Pick's workings?"

"More than likely it will. Prospectors don't usually work near each other unless they've already found good color and staked claims."

"That'd be it," Johnny murmured. "It wouldn't be a sure thing, but it might be." He rose. "You'll let me know then, Hugo, if anyone brings in samples that jibe with Pick's?"

"Gladly."

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JOHNNY left then. Here was something to work on; slim enough, it appeared, but nevertheless something. It would take patience and a lot of it. He stopped in at the sheriff's office and found Billy Blue loading his pockets with half dollars. He grinned up at Johnny and said, "That's my ammunition. Fifty cents a drink. You ought to take a tip from an old campaigner, son."

Johnny shook his head. "Got the mail yet?"

"Uh-uh. I'm on my way."

"Don't bother. I'll pick it up," Johnny said. He turned down toward Bledsoe's Miners' Emporium, where the post office was. A section in the front of the store had been partitioned off to make the post office. This partition consisted of a rack of pigeon holes, opened at both ends. The mail had been brought in on the stage only a few minutes before, and Bledsoe, the fat postmaster, who always waited to rack up the local mail with that brought in on the stage, was busy behind the partition. Most of the waiting crowd had already received its mail and was reading it.

Johnny looked in his pigeon hole and saw that it was vacant and stuck his head through the wicket. "Nothin' for me, Bledsoe?"

"A lot," Bledsoe said, and reached up to haul it out. He withdrew his pudgy hand, looking surprised. "Why, you had a whole boxful not ten seconds ago, Johnny," he said slowly.

Johnny wheeled to confront the crowd. Miners, punchers, men and women were standing in small clusters in the front of the store, most of them reading, some conversing. They had not heard Bledsoe's conversation with Johnny, for they were paying no attention to him—all except one dirty and unshaven puncher. Johnny's gaze whipped past him, and the man turned down-store. As he wheeled, Johnny saw a sheaf of envelopes peeping out of his pocket.

Johnny started toward him, and then stopped. It would look mighty foolish to go up and accost the puncher and ask to see the letters. If that story got around, Baily Blue would turn it into a laugh, and no one knew better than Johnny how easy it is to laugh a man out of office. But still, he wasn't sure, and he loafed back through the store keeping a good distance between the puncher and himself.

The puncher stopped down the counter and asked the clerk for a box of shells, then turned and glanced obliquely at Johnny, who was pretending to examine a gun lying on the counter.

When he looked up again, the puncher was walking rapidly toward the rear of the store. Johnny, his suspicions thoroughly aroused now, took after him.

Outside, the puncher turned up the alley and out of sight and Johnny ran to the back door, yanked it open and raced out into the alley. Ahead of him, the puncher was running as fast as he could. Johnny lit out after him, drawing his gun. He shot once into the air and yelled, "Better pull up, fella.' "

FOR answer, the puncher stopped abruptly, whirled with gun in hand and started to shoot. Johnny cut off to his right for the shelter of a shed, and he emptied his gun in swift *rat-a-plan*. He saw the puncher go down, and he stopped, then loaded his gun and walked carefully toward him. He hadn't expected this, and he cursed himself for losing his head. What if the man had only been trying to get out of the way of what he thought was an officious

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lawman? One look at him, and Johnny saw he was dead. One of the slugs had caught him in the neck, and he lay on his back, head twisted awry. And Johnny remembered that it was himself who had shot first.

Men started to collect in the alley. Swiftly, Johnny kneeled down and rolled the man over and pulled the letters out of his levi pocket. A glance at them brought a wave of relief over him, for they were his.

To the first few men around him—hard-case loafers at Prince's Keno parlor—Johnny held out the letters. "Stole them," he drawled calmly. "When will these tinhorns learn they can't hooraw everybody in this town?"

He could see the dislike in the eyes of these men. One of them said, "You couldn't've asked him for 'em, I don't suppose?"

"If you see a man ridin' off on your horse, you don't ask him to get off, do you?" Johnny drawled.

"It ain't the same thing," the man countered.

Another said, "This a sample of that Law and Order you're talkin' about?"

Johnny picked out the speaker and walked over to him. "It is. Don't you like it?"

"Not much."

"This is a wide country, friend," he said gently, ominously. "If you don't like it, there's lots of roads out of here."

"I'll stick," the speaker sneered. "We ain't worried much about your gettin' in. Even if you do, we ain't exactly frettin'."

Johnny said, "Saturday night, I may start to worry you." He indicated the dead puncher. "Any of you know him?"

None of them did. They had seen him, they said, but they didn't think he worked here or was known except to maybe a few barkeeps.

"Just a harmless pilgrim," Johnny drawled drily. "Like so many rannies I could name around here. In a couple of weeks, maybe these pilgrims will decide it's a little safer to ride on through Cosmos." And with that he left them to hunt up a teamster who would deliver the corpse to the coroner.

When that was finished, he went down to the hotel. In his pocket were the letters—and they were the ones he had been expecting today from the ten ranchers he had consulted. In them would be the names of all the undesirables the honest ranchers wanted run out of the county. Obviously, somebody knew what these letters contained, and wanted to destroy them.

Nora wasn't at the Cosmos house, but Johnny went into the deserted dining room, shut the door behind him and pulled up a chair, spreading his letters on the table.

He opened all eight of them, for two of the ranchers were not represented. The lists were all printed, giving no clue to their writers.

With a stub of pencil and a sheet of paper, Johnny tabulated the names, and when he was finished, he sat back in his chair, amazement in his face.

"So Major Fitz heads the list!" he murmured. "Well, I'll be whupped! I'll be double, triple hog-whupped!"

It didn't make sense, yet there was the evidence. Six of the eight ranchers put Major Fitz' name at the head of their lists. Johnny pulled out a sack of tobacco and thoughtfully rolled a smoke. He'd got more than he bargained for here, but what did it mean? Originally, he had wanted to give these men a chance to express their honest beliefs without having to present inadequate proof and explanations. But Major Fitz? In cow country, no company outfit is ever loved, but to accuse

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the manager of the Bar 33 of rustling beef was another matter. Of course they would seize this opportunity of telling it, for they wouldn't dare say so in public. And it couldn't be one man's grudge; too many had hit on Fitz' name.

He heard the door open and he swept the lists into one pile as Nora stepped into the room. She looked at him accusingly as she walked over to him, peeling off her coat.

"Hiding something?"

Johnny only grinned, and then, on that chance that two heads might be better than one, he decided to tell her. "Remember that scheme I told you about—having the honest ranchers send in the names of the bad hombres?" Nora nodded. "Guess who's the most unwanted jasper in this county."

"Johnny Hendry," Nora said, and then became serious. "Who?"

"Major Fitz."

Nora's face fell. "Let's see." When she'd looked over the lists, she put them down and said flatly, "Honest ranchers, nothing! Who all did you go to, Johnny? The bums and cattle thieves?"

"Ten men you like."

"But I like Major Fitz!"

"So do I. What do you make of it?"

Nora said hotly, "I just think it goes to show that some men will do mean and underhanded things if they don't have to sign their names to them!"

Thoughtfully, Johnny struck a match and touched off the lists and shoved them in the fireplace. "Mebbeso," he said slowly, but he couldn't help thinking about that puncher who had attempted to steal the letters. Had he been sent by Major Fitz, who might have guessed that his name would lead the list of undesirables? Johnny didn't know. "But whatever it is," he told Nora, "it's a secret between us."

CHAPTER VI

GOLD SHIPMENT

HANK BRENDER was clear out beyond the fourth corral when the Bar 33 triangle clanged for breakfast, so that he was the last man to the cookshack. As he entered, he felt, without being able to pin it down, that a subtle change came over his fellow punchers. The talk didn't stop, the usual number started to ride him about not being hungry, but he had the uncomfortable impression that the subject of conversation had been suddenly switched, and that the cameraderie was forced. This wasn't the first time he had noticed it, and it made him feel an outsider.

Sitting down, he noticed a stranger at the table, and like all these strangers lately—men who rode the grub line and could not be refused a meal—this one was shifty-eyed, furtive and silent. Nobody knew him, or said they didn't, but Hank had the feeling that they did. Somehow, things were different lately. Hands never stayed here long any more, and there wasn't that old loyalty to the Bar 33 that used to make it a pleasant and secure place to work.

As Hank sat down, Major Fitz rapped his tin cup with his knife, and the table fell silent.

"No work today, boys," the Major announced. "As you all know, this is election day. As soon as you've finished the work around the place, you can ride into town. Blake, at the bank, will pay you at two, not a minute before. If you haven't all voted before that time, you'd better not let me find it out." He paused, and glared around the table at his men. "And if you don't get down there—all of you—before you see a pay check or any whisky, and

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vote for Johnny Hendry, you needn't bother to come back here. Understand that?"

They did. The talk turned to the election, and although there was a long ticket of offices, nobody discussed anything but the election of the sheriff. Hank listened closely, but he could not hear one dissenter from the Major's opinion. Johnny Hendry was liked here, it seemed.

After breakfast, as Hank stood outside the cookshack rolling a toothpick in his mouth, Major Fitz and Carmody, the foreman, came up.

"Hank, I've got a favor to ask of you," Major Fitz said bluntly.

When Hank inclined his head, the Major said, "I picked you because you're the steadiest hand here and probably won't feel this is such a burden. The rest of the men are anxious to get to town and vote and start drinking. It won't matter to you if you're an hour or so late, will it?"

Hank said no.

"Well, Art Bodan rode past that north pasture last night on his way home and he said there was a hundred foot of fence down. He rode around and made sure the horses were pushed up to the far end, but he couldn't fix it because he didn't have any tools. Would you mind ridin' out today and stringin' that wire back?"

"Not a bit," Hank said obligingly. He was a little surprised at the politeness of the Major's request, since he usually didn't ask a man to do a thing; he simply ordered him.

Carmody, the foreman, said, "Better get goin' now, Hank. The boys can clear up the work here in short order."

Hank went over to the bunkhouse to get a pair of heavy gloves. No one else was in the place. Prompted by something he could not immediately define, Hank tucked a pair of glasses in his hip pocket and went out to saddle up. When he had his wire wrapped in gunny sack and slung over the saddle horn, and the hammer and some staples, he mounted and rode south up the ridge. Once over it, he turned sharply and headed for some trees that saddled the ridge. Dismounting, he worked his way up the hump and bellied down in some brush, training his glasses back on the ranch house not a half mile away.

Out in the yard, the whole crew was gathered listening to Major Fitz. Something stirred Hank's anger at the sight. It was as if Major Fitz didn't want him to be in on this parley. And suddenly, Hank knew that he had been sent on this errand so that the Major would be rid of him. Passionately, Hank wanted to hear what was being said by Major Fitz down there. The hard-case stranger stood at the Major's right, listening. Then the gathering broke up and Major Fitz joined the stranger and they both walked toward the trim white house.

Hank drew back into the brush and squatted on his haunches, rolling and lighting a smoke. He was an even-tempered sort, but for the first time in his life, he felt sulky. He cuffed the battered Stetson back off his forehead and thoughtfully pulled the lock of gray-shot hair that licked down on his forehead. He'd worked under Major Fitz longer than any man down there—twice as long as Carmody had worked for him. And now they thought they had to send him away so they could talk among themselves. But why? Funny things were going on down there and had been for a year—secret things that a man could only guess at.

HE smoked his cigarette down until it burned his fingers and then he dropped it and stepped on it, his homely

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face set in a stubborn cast. That fence up there could go straight to hell as far as he was concerned. He was going to get at the bottom of this.

Back in the brush, he trained his glasses on the house and kept them there. Presently, the stranger came out alone, went to the corral, snaked out his horse and saddled up and rode north, toward town.

Hank didn't waste a minute. Back to his pony, he cached the wire and tools and swung down along the ridge west until it petered out.

Riding an arroyo bottom, he swung north, keeping out of sight until finally he was a mile or so away from the house, and then he cut back to the road. The tracks of the stranger's horse showed plainly in the dust of the road. He followed them at a leisurely pace. Just before the road topped the ridge south of town, the tracks turned off to the left. This time, Hank used more caution. The tracking was difficult in this broken and rocky terrain, but he saw that the man was keeping to this side of the ridge until he was below the town. Hank dismounted then and went ahead, carefully scanning the broken country ahead of him.

Rounding a jut of rock, he saw the man's horse ground-haltered by a screening piñon. He drew back, circled wide and crawled up on a small, flat-topped butte. There, on the lip of the ridge under a piñon, the man was bellied down watching something below. Hank shifted his position until he also could look into the canyon.

Below them, in the bottom of the canyon below the town, lay the stamp mill. Hank watched it for a few moments, his face puzzled.

Suddenly, he saw a flash of reflected sun, and then he understood that someone was signaling to the stranger.

TIP ROGERS, superintendent of the Esmerella mine, was at work a little early on election day, so as to be at the shaft mouth when the night shift came off duty. The men of this shift he called into the big freighting shed and told them to wait a minute. The day shift of miners was just collecting at the shaft mouth, and he told these men to come into the freighting shed too. Once they were all collected, Tip mounted a piling and look them over. He was a young high-shouldered man with crisp, curly brown hair, dressed in breeches and lace boots and with an engaging serious face that was more sober than usual today. These men were his seniors, most of them, and he did not like the task set him, but he cleared his throat and raised his hand.

"What I've got to say is mighty short," he told them. "If Baily Blue is elected sheriff of this county again, the Esmerella will have to shut down. I don't have to tell you that means you'll lose your jobs."

"How come that, Tip?" one of the miners asked.

"Because the insurance companies are asking such high rates to insure our bullion shipments that we can't make any money. And if we can't insure the stuff, we'll be cleaned out in a couple of months. And if we're cleaned out you won't have any employer to work for any more—no pay checks. That's simple enough, isn't it?"

The miners looked at each other. A voice carried over their murmur. "First time I ever knowed a outfit to make its workers vote the way it said."

Tip nodded. "We don't like it either, Bill, but that's how things stand. Unless there's a Law and Order sheriff put in here, we can't operate. We're not tellin' you how you have to vote. We're just saying that if you want to keep your

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jobs, you'll have to help put Johnny Hendry in office."

"You think he'll clean it up?"

Tip's jaw muscles corded a little. "You really want to know what I think? I don't think he will. I don't think he can. But he's the only hope we've got. Get behind him and give him a try." Then he told them that the day shift would get two hours above ground at noon to vote, and dismissed them.

Inside the Esmerella office, he passed the door of the manager, Sammon's, office and went into his own neat cubby hole. He drew some papers from his desk, put them in his pocket and went outside to a saddled horse waiting at the tie rail.

His ride into town was slow and thoughtful. The streets of Cosmos were in an uproar, and there was much drinking already at this early hour. Tip looked at the scene contemptuously, and picked his way down the thronged street to the Cosmos hotel.

IN the dining room, Nora was serving the late breakfasters, and among them was Johnny Hendry. Tip scowled, but Nora smiled and waved him over to where she stood talking with Johnny.

"Sit down, Tip," Johnny invited, and Tip did, ordering his breakfast. He and Johnny regarded each other with a wary neutrality, for when Johnny wasn't with Nora, Tip usually was. But Tip knew that hard-faced, grinning Johnny had the inside track with her and he resented it with all the heat his good manners allowed him to show—which wasn't much.

"You don't seem worried about the election," Tip observed as Johnny went on with his breakfast.

"I'll win it. Why shouldn't I?" Johnny countered arrogantly.

"What if you do? Do you think you'll be able to clean up the place?"

Johnny looked at him swiftly. "I do. You don't, do you?"

"No."

"Want to bet?"

"Sure," Tip said, smiling crookedly. "What?"

Johnny laid down his fork and stared at Tip with speculative interest. "What is it you think I can't handle?"

"You won't calm down these hard-cases, let alone drive 'em out. You won't solve the rustling or the robberies or the murders any more than you did under Blue."

"You think I can expect trouble soon, then?" Johnny murmured innocently.

"Right away," Tip said flatly.

Nora came back now with Tip's breakfast and sat down at the third chair. Johnny said to her, "Tip thinks I can expect trouble right away after I'm elected." He looked at Tip grinning. "How soon?"

"If you're elected, you'll get it tonight, or tomorrow."

Johnny grinned broadly now. "And you're willin' to bet I can't handle it? Furthermore, you're willin' to bet I can't solve all this stuff that Blue don't pay any attention to?"

"That's right."

Johnny leaned back and drawled, "Nora tells me as soon as you heard about this election dance Monday night, you asked her to go."

"I did," Tip admitted, and looked down at Nora. "You're going with me, aren't you?"

"You asked me first," Nora said.

Johnny cut in. "Are you willin' to bet the chance to take Nora to the dance that I can't handle any trouble that comes up between now and Monday?"

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"Sure," Tip said flatly. "But I already had the date. That's what I'm putting up. What are you putting up?"

"My resignation," Johnny murmured, eying Tip steadily.

Tip leaned forward in his chair and said, "You're crazy, Hendry. Even I wouldn't expect you to put that up for a stake."

"It's up," Johnny murmured, and rose, looking down at Nora. "I'll leave you love birds to yourselves," he said, grinning. "Me, I'm goin' out and elect myself. I'll see you Monday night, honey," he said to Nora, and laughed at Tip's glare of anger.

Tip regarded Johnny's receding back with a wry expression. "Some day, somebody's going to work that cocky puncher over," he growled.

Nora giggled. "It'll take a good man."

"But look!" Tip protested. "His stepfather was killed only a few days ago. You'd think he'd be a little more considerate of his memory, quiet down a little, and stop his swaggering. Instead, you wouldn't ever know he'd had any hard luck. You'd—"

"Stop that!" Nora said sharply. "Johnny loved Pick! But does he have to go around moaning in public to prove he's sorrowing?" Nora's eyes were dancing with anger. "Everything he thinks or does now is planned to help in getting Pick's killer. Don't criticize something you don't know anything about, Tip Rogers!"

Tip smiled a little. "All right, I'm wrong. But don't scratch my eyes out."

Nora flushed a little and her eyes lost their anger. She even smiled forgivingly. "All right, Tip, but don't ever try to knock Johnny to me. He's all right."

"I suppose he is," Tip agreed wryly. "I might even like him if he didn't like you so much."

WHEN Tip was finished eating, he went out to his horse again, mounted and rode west out of town toward the stamp mill. Approaching it, he could hear the earth-shaking thunder of the stamps as they crushed the ore in the reduction process. The mill itself was a series of red-painted, corrugated tin-roofed sheds tipping up the slope of the canyon side. The offices were down in the valley bottom at the very end of the building. A dozen ore freighters waited their turn at the scales and hoppers and the place buzzed with activity. Tip saw a bent old prospector drive his buckboard onto the weighing platform. He had a half dozen sacks of ore in the back of his buckboard. Tip smiled a little as he regarded the man. Then he stepped into the building and was shown into the manager's office.

Kinder, an officious, sandy-haired little man, greeted him, and they shook hands. Kinder had been watching out the window, and now he returned to it.

"His outfit is pretty clever, isn't it?" he said to Tip.

"Is he the one?" Tip asked, laughing. "I thought he was an old desert rat."

"Here he comes now," Kinder said.

In a few moments, the prospector was ushered into Kinder's office, and Kinder shook his hand and indicated Tip. "Reese, this is Tip Rogers, the Esmerella super." To Tip he said, "Believe it or not, this is Reese, your insurance man. He doesn't look like an insurance man, but he is—in more ways than one."

They shook hands. Reese, under his week's growth of stubble, was a tough, wiry man of middle age. His soiled and tattered clothes seemed more incon-

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gruous when he spoke to Tip in cultivated English.

"The bars are under the sacks in the back of my buckboard," he announced to Kinder. "Your man contrived to unload my sacks of ore and put the bars in without even seeing it." He laughed softly. "Well, do you think we'll get away with it this time?"

"I hope so," Tip said fervently. "One more hold-up and you people will quit insuring us for good."

"That's right," Reese said crisply. "If this fails, the only alternative is a good sized army to guard the shipments. And that, I'm afraid, is a little too expensive all around."

Kinder laid out some papers in front of Reese. "Here's the weight. Four pigs at twelve thousand dollars value each. That's forty-eight thousand. Here's the ounces and weights, checked and rechecked."

"I'll take your word for it," Reese said. He in turn drew papers from his pocket, as did Tip. When everything was signed, Tip retained the insurance papers.

Again Reese shook hands all around. "Wish me luck."

"I do," Tip said solemnly. "It's a rotten shame that this is the only way gold can be got out of the country. Maybe a new sheriff will help, but I doubt it."

"We'll see," Reese said.

Outside, Reese went over to his buckboard, and waved to the checker, who stood by the scales.

"Good luck, dad," the checker called, and he watched while Reese turned the buckboard around and took the road west away from the mill.

Then the checker turned to his assistant. "Take this over, Frank. I want a drink."

He walked over to the huge watering trough away from the buildings. A pipe funneled water into it, and the checker leaned over to drink from its mouth. But at the same time, he drew a small mirror from his shirt, and while he was pretending to drink, he held it out in the sun and turned it toward the opposite rim of the canyon. He could see its reflection on the cliff side. Finally, he focused it at the base of a gnarled lone piñon on the canyon rim. Then, by dragging his hand across the mirror, he conveyed a simple code in dots and dashes. It only took a half minute. When he was finished, he drank and returned to his work, whistling.

CHAPTER VII

ELECTION NIGHT

WHEN the stranger withdrew from the rim, Hank stayed where he was. He saw the man get his horse and ride west, past the very butte on which Hank was lying. For a long moment, Hank regarded the vanishing horseman with puzzlement. None of this made sense—or very little of it—but Hank was a stubborn man.

He got his horse and started to follow. In an hour's riding, he was off the ridge and down in the shallow canyon. Presently, the tracks crossed the dusty road, and Hank pulled up to investigate. Here, the stranger had paused to also look at tracks—buckboard tracks—but instead of clinging to the road, he crossed it, heading northwest. Now, Hank could see that the man had put his horse into a steady trot. Hank followed suit. The country was so broken and up-ended here with shale hills and clay dunes that the going was slow and tortuous. It was also dangerous, for if it once occurred to the stranger that he was being followed, it would be simple

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to pull off behind a dune and wait for his pursuer. But that was a chance Hank was willing to take.

Trying to figure out the rider's destination, Hank recalled the country as best he could. He remembered the road continued west for a few miles, then turned at right angles north to skirt the edge of this dune country and the desert. In other words, the rider must be taking a shortcut.

As he approached the edge of the dunes, Hank went on with a little more caution, his hand riding close to his gun. And then, rounding one of the dunes, Hank saw the man's horse ahead of him. Shuttling his gaze to the peak of the tallest dune, Hank saw the stranger bellied down, facing the far side. Even as he watched, the stranger raised a rifle to his shoulder and sighted it. For one full second, Hank was locked in indecision, and then his hand swept down toward his gun. The stranger's rifle crashed sharp and loud in that stillness, and on the heel of it, Hank's six-gun roared. The stranger made a move to rise, to push himself erect, then fell down on his face, slacked over on his back and continued to rolled down the side of the dune until he lay stretched in the powdery clay at the bottom.

Hank regarded him with sober distaste, then urged his horse forward. He did not stop at the man's body but circled the dune until he could see beyond. There, the road snaked along paralleling the dunes only a hundred feet away. Up the road, a buckboard was traveling at a smart clip, and Hank could see the shapeless form of a body on the seat.

Spurring his horse, Hank overtook the buckboard and pulled alongside the off-horse. Leaning out, he got a short grip on the reins near the bit and pulled the team to a stop. Dismounting, he walked back to the buckboard and examined the man lying face down on the seat. He was shot through the chest, and must have died immediately. To Hank, he looked like an old desert rat, dirty and unshaven and tattered.

"But he can't be," Hank mused. "Why'd this jasper want to kill an old hard-shell desert man?"

The gunny sacks on the floor of the buckboard beneath the seat caught Hank's attention, and he clawed down among them, hoping for something to give a clue to the killing. And there, just beneath the sacks, Hank discovered the bars of bullion. He whistled in exclamation, admiring their rich sheen, and then turned back to the dead man. In his pockets, Hank found the insurance papers, and immediately he understood. It was Esmerella gold, and the insurance company had tried to sneak it safely out of the country. Some hardcase at the stamp mill had given this bushwhacker the tip-off, and he had followed the agent to kill and rob him of the bullion.

Hank rolled a smoke and considered all this. Whether he wanted to deny it or not, he couldn't escape the fact that this bushwhacker had been in conference with Major Fitz only five hours ago, and that he had come from the Bar 33 straight to this killing. Was Fitz behind it? Hank couldn't believe it. He thought he knew Fitz well enough to feel sure that he would never be a party to a cold-blooded killing, but on the other hand, Hank remembered that conference he had witnessed through the glasses only this morning.

And suddenly, Hank thought of Johnny Hendry. By nightfall, he might be the new sheriff. Why not take the matter to him? For Hank knew without having to be told that his days with the Bar 33 were over.

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IT was nearly dark when Hank pulled in the alley behind the sheriff's office with his strange burden of forty-eight thousand dollars in gold and two dead men. His entrance was practically unnoticed, for he chose the side streets. Besides, the town was too busy with election hilarity to pay any attention to him. He slipped the bars into a gunny sack, and hoisted them on his shoulder. The sheriff's office was locked and dark and he could not leave the bullion here in the alley.

On the street, he picked his way through the milling crowds looking for Johnny, stopping to rest occasionally. He found Johnny seated on the porch of the Cosmos House in one of the deep chairs in a dark corner. Just as Hank dumped his load beside Johnny, there was a fanfare of shots and chorus of yells upstreet. That would be another demonstration for Blue.

Johnny said, "What's that? The Bar 33 votes?"

"Take a look," Hank advised.

Johnny dragged out a bar and looked at it, noting the Esmerella stamp, and then shifted his somber questioning glance to Hank, who told him what had happened. But Hank neglected to mention that the murderer had stayed the night at the Bar 33.

When he was finished, Johnny said shrewdly, "How'd you come across him, Hank?"

"I was ridin' in from the spread, and he was ahead of me," Hank said carefully. "He kept lookin' around. Finally, I didn't see him on the road. Then I noticed where his tracks turned off. I pulled off the road myself farther on, and hid and pretty soon he come along. I was curious, is all."

"You liar," Johnny murmured calmly, smiling a little. "Where did you really pick him up?"

Hank grinned sheepishly, and then the grin died. "At the Bar 33." He told Johnny the true story, and Johnny did not comment immediately. Hank took a chair beside him, and they sat there in silence, rolling smokes. When the match flared, Hank could see Johnny's face and it was stamped with a somber scowl.

"What do you make of it, Hank?" Johnny asked quietly.

"I dunno. I ain't even tryin' to make anything out of it. All I know is what I told you. Did Fitz want to get me out of the way so he could talk to that hard-case?"

"It looks like it."

"It does. It looks enough like it that I'm quittin' the Bar 33. I don't like the feel of it."

Johnny considered a long moment. What Hank had told him was more than significant in the face of those six notes naming Fitz as an undesirable, and the bushwhacker who tried to get him the other day. But proof! Nothing was any good without proof. Besides, Johnny wanted to be fair. Setting aside his own real affection for Major Fitz, he wanted to make sure of his facts before doing anything—providing the election put him in a position to do anything. None of it made sense—or rather it did make sense, but the wrong kind.

While he was sitting in silence, the hotel door opened and Tip Rogers came out. Johnny called to him and Tip walked over. Johnny pointed to the bars. "Those yours?"

It was so dark Tip could not immediately make out what he was pointing at, but he stopped and examined them. Then he took one bar over to the light and checked the stamping. Back beside Johnny, he said quietly, "Yes. Where did they come from?"

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"Your agent was killed," Johnny murmured. "Hank Brender here killed the man who did it."

For a moment, Tip said nothing, and then he turned his attention to Hank, asking for details, and Hank told him. When he was finished, Tip thanked him, and then was silent a moment.

"Well, Johnny," he said finally. "It rests with you whether or not the Esmerella shuts down. If you clean out this riffraff, we can operate. If you don't, we're closing."

"I've done all right so far," Johnny murmured.

"You?" Tip asked, surprise in his voice. "What did you do?"

"It was my deputy who got your gold back for you."

Tip peered at Hank, whose face was as surprised as his own. Luckily, the dark hid Hank's expression. "Deputy? Is he your deputy?"

"He is. Unofficially, right now. Officially, when I get elected."

Tip said resentfully, "I suppose you're going to claim that you're entitled to take Nora to the dance, now?"

"Not at all," Johnny murmured. "I'll earn that on my own hook."

Tip grunted and said, "Will you watch this gold until I can get hold of Turnbull to open the bank for me?"

Johnny said he would, and Tip left. When he was gone, Johnny looked over at Hank. "How about it, Hank? Would you like the job?"

"I couldn't handle it, Johnny," Hank said gravely. "I don't know anything about the business."

"So much the better. The only thing you need is honesty. You've got that." He told Hank about hiring Turk Hebron, and the circumstances which prompted him in his choice, and Hank agreed with him. "What I want now is a deputy to police this town in place of a marshal. It'll take a tough man and a scrapper, and a man that this wolf pack of hard-cases will respect." He grinned. "I don't want to give you a swelled head, Hank, but you fit that bill pretty good. You've quit your job. Furthermore, it'll make it easier for you to quit Fitz, since I'll be offerin' you twice what he's payin'. What about it?"

Hank, after a moment's thought, said dubiously, "All right." Johnny felt pleased now; he had acquired his deputies. All he needed now was the election, and that was out of his hands.

CHAPTER VIII

ULTIMATUM

COSMOS, naturally, did not go to bed election night. At ten o'clock the ballots were brought in from Lynn's Ford, the only other settlement in the county which could be dignified by the name of a town. There was shooting and shouting as the election officers retired to the courthouse to count them; because, except for one far corner of the county, Doane's Trading Post, which at best would only muster a dozen or so votes, the election would be decided when the votes now in were counted.

Johnny and Hank picked up Turk Hebron at the Palace and the three of them stood out on the sidewalk watching the crowd. It had collected now in front of the courthouse, an ordinary store building next to the sheriff's office. It had once been a saloon, but now its interior was partitioned off to allow for a half dozen offices in the front part of the building and the courtroom behind. The street was blocked now with the milling throng, half of whom were drunk.

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Turk, observing it with a wry expression on his hard face, grinned crookedly. "If we get in, gents, we've got our work cut out." At Prince's Keno parlor, they took a corner table and ordered drinks. Turk heard Hank's story of the attempted holdup of the Esmerelda gold and he only grinned with pleasant anticipation at what this signified.

Hank had scarcely finished his story when, suddenly, the noise in the street started to fade.

Johnny said quickly, "They're announcin' the vote."

Out on the sidewalk across from the courthouse, they leaned against a store building. Bledsoe, one of the commissioners, was on the steps, his pudgy hands raised high in the air for silence. Slowly, the talk died down, until there was utter quiet along the street.

"The results of the election for sheriff are as follows," Bledsoe bellowed. "Baily Blue—three hundred and seventy-three votes." A mighty shout rose from the crowd, and Bledsoe waved his arms again to quiet it. Johnny looked bleakly at Turk, but said nothing. When Bledsoe had silence again, he said, "For sheriff, Johnny Hendry—four hundred and one votes."

For a moment, there was a stunned silence, and then a scattering of applause which was dimmed by a disgusted muttering. Again Bledsoe raised his hand. "If Johnny Hendry is in the crowd, will he come forward?"

Johnny said to Turk and Hank, "Come along," and elbowed his way through the crowd to Bledsoe's side. A few people called congratulations on the way, but Johnny did not fool himself that he was popular on this night. If he was not openly hissed and booed, it was only because the hard-cases would need a little time to brood on the injustice done them.

Bledsoe, a stout, bald merchant, head commissioner, led the three of them back into the courtroom, where several men in shirtsleeves sat idling at a table littered with ballots. Four of them rose, took Johnny aside, and swore him into office. Once that was finished, Johnny came back to the table. Hank and Turk were sitting unobstrusively in chairs gainst the wall.

"Well, Hendry," Bledsoe said, his round face beaming. "We did it for you. Are you going to pay us back by cleaning up the town and county?"

Johnny was irritated a little at Bledsoe's assumption that it was the merchants who had elected him, but he only nodded gravely. "That's what I promised."

"Then we've all got in mind a couple of good men for your deputies. The statute provides for two of them, one to police the town in case of necessity. We've got your men for you."

Johnny looked along at Bledsoe, his face expressionless, and finally said, "I've got my deputies."

Bledsoe seemed disappointed and a little suspicious. "Who?"

"The two you see sittin' right over there," Johnny said. "Turk Hebron and Hank Brender, Hank to be the marshal."

It was Turk's turn now to look uncomfortable as every man in the room looked over at him. Finally, Bledsoe said to Turk, "Would you mind leaving the room, Hebron?"

"He would," Johnny cut in flatly. "What you've got to say about him, you can say to his face—and to mine."

Bledsoe looked at his colleagues with obvious discomfort, and at a nod from two or three of them, he sat on the table and faced Johnny.

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"ALL right, boy," he said seriously, "I will say it to your face. You've been elected by us on a law and order platform. Three minutes after you've taken the oath of office, you announce that you've appointed an outlaw and an unknown puncher for your deputies. Does that look like you're keeping your word?"

"Who did you men have in mind for deputies?" Johnny countered.

"Frank Salem and Les McMahon are two men you couldn't beat. Honest, incorruptible and industrious."

"True enough," Johnny drawled, walking over to Bledsoe and facing him, hands on hips. "But if I recollect right, Bledsoe, Frank Salem is a man who's never worn a gun, or has he?"

"No. So much the better."

"And Mac is studyin' law while he's counter-jumpin' at your store. That right?"

"That's right. Nevertheless, they are both honest men."

"True," Johnny murmured. "Supposin' there was a quarrel over at Prince's Keno Parlor—you know, the usual kind, with somebody goin' for a gun, somebody else shootin' out the lights, and the rest of them takin' sides and wreckin' the place. What would Mac do in a case like that?"

"Stop them" Bledsoe said.

"How?"

"By being there—by demanding law and order and threatening the lot of them with arrest."

"We've got a four-cell jail," Johnny said drily. "I saw one of those hard-cases toss Mac clear over the doors of the Palace one night because he didn't like Mac's white shirt." Johnny leaned both fists on the table and looked around at the commissioners. "Wake up, you men. A man has got to be a gun-fighter to lay down the law in this man's town and county. He's got to be a little handier with his fists, and a sight quicker with his guns, than anybody else in sight if he wants to live long. I appreciate that honesty is somethin' my deputies have got to have. But I also know they've got to be tough enough to cram that honesty down the throats of these men that are makin' this county impossible to live in." He straightened up. "Turk Hebron and Hank Brender stay. And if you'll give me a pencil and a piece of paper, I'll show you why."

In silence, one of the commissioners handed him paper and pencil. Johnny printed in big letters across the paper:

BY MIDNIGHT TOMORROW, EVERY MAN THAT CAN'T SHOW ME HE HAS GOT A FULL-TIME JOB WITH A RESPECTABLE EMPLOYER HAD BETTER BE CLEARED OUT OF COSMOS AND THE COUNTY.
(SIGNED)
JOHNNY HENDRY, SHERIFF.

He shoved the paper at Bledsoe and said, "How far would Frank or Mac get enforcin' that?"

Bledsoe read the paper and handed it to the other commissioners. Each, in his own way, expressed disapproval. "You'll never make it stick, Hendry," Bledsoe said flatly, "You've got more sense than to stir up a hornet's nest." Paused, he regarded Johnny with outright suspicion. "In fact, I think it's a bluff."

Johnny ripped the paper out of his hand and strode down the hall. Outside, the crowd was still collected in the street. Johnny ignored them, turning to the bulletin board. He hung the paper over a nail, and then turned to face the crowd. "You want me to read it to you?" he asked, and they could

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tell by the timbre of his voice that he was angry.

"Sure," somebody called.

Johnny said, "It just says that every one of you hard-cases who can't show you've got a job with a genuine employer had better clear out of here before midnight tomorrow night."

He listened for any protest. There were a few quiet laughs, considerable muttering, but no open defiance. He was surprised at this, and half suspected a conspiracy to ignore him, when an insolent voice drawled, "And who says so?"

Johnny leaped down into the crowd, but Turk and Hank were already ahead of him. Violently, they shouldered their way through the crowd until they got to where the speaker stood. It was one of Leach Wigran's men, and nobody in that crowd had to be told that Wigran was one of the most successful and insolent rustlers in the county, and that his spread, the Running W, was a robber's roost.

Neither Turk nor Hank wasted words. The man who had called was behind four other hard-cases who made a solid rank in front of him. He was grinning over the shoulder of one.

HANK simply flipped out a gun and slugged one man of the four. He went down like a shot quail, and Hank stepped back then, covering the other three with his gun. It was Turk who stepped over the fallen man into the breach in the ranks, put out a hairy, hard fist, grabbed the grinning man's coat in a tight ball of his fist and yanked. The man came out sailing, to land squarely on his feet in the circle that had been cleared for the scuffle.

Then Turk, holding the man erect by his coat, hit him once in the face. Then, for that whole crowd to watch, Turk finished the job. The man was fighting now, but Turk ignored his blows as if they were not even aimed at him. With the spaced precision of a ticking clock, he hit the man twelve times in the face. After four of them, the man's knees buckled, and Turk had to hold him up. But he kept on, until each sodden punch smacked over the hushed silence of the crowd. At the twelfth blow, Turk rolled his shoulder under and heaved the man off his feet and then threw him at the other Wigran men. They caught him, and let him slide to the ground.

"Anybody else want a taste of what's comin'?" Johnny drawled from behind Turk. Nobody did, it seemed; but if ever hatred was a living and tangible thing, it was then. It would only take a spark, a word, a voice lifted in anger to turn the crowd into a lynch mob.

Johnny said quickly, "Then break it up. The other offices won't be announced for an hour yet."

Slowly, the crowd started to mill, and then tension eased off. The Wigran men, without a word, took their two casualties and disappeared in the throng.

Turk turned to Johnny and said, "That was close, wasn't it?"

"There'll be closer," Johnny replied grimly.

Suddenly, he felt a hand on his arm, and turned to confront Nora. Her face was paler than he had ever seen it, and he had his mouth open to speak when Nora said passionately, "Johnny Hendry, that was the most foolish thing three men ever did!"

Turk only grinned and Hank looked sheepish while Johnny smiled broadly. "We've got to make our brag good now."

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Nora shook her head in earnest bewilderment. "But Johnny, nobody can get away with a thing like that twice! You were lucky tonight!"

"I know it."

"What about next time, though?"

"Wait till it comes, Miss Nora," Turk said gently. He looked quizzically at Johnny. "You know," he said slowly, "somehow I feel better for doin' that than I'd feel if I'd won a couple of thousand dollars."

Johnny looked swiftly at Nora to see if she had understood, for Turk had spoken with the simple honesty of a man who has had a chance to make good, and who is thankful.

Nora said gently, "You three will have to stick together from now on. Let me change your room, Johnny, so that nobody will know the number. And whatever room Mrs. Jenkins gives you, I'm going to have three beds put in it. From now on, you'll have to hang together or be shot separately."

And all of them, without saying anything, knew it was true.

As they turned to go, Major Fitz approached and held out his hand to Johnny. "Damn glad," he said bluntly, and then, turning to Turk, observed, "Once upon a time, Hebron, I would have said that you were about the least choice trash I ever had the misfortune to know. Mind if I take it back now, in public?" and he held out his hand to Turk.

To Hank, he said, "How did you get in on this, Hank?"

Johnny put in quickly, "I've got a favor to ask, Major."

Major Fitz looked at him and then back at Hank and said, "What is it? I think I know."

"I need a deputy. Hank fills my bill. Do you think you could spare him from the Bar 33 until I get this mess cleaned up?"

"Certainly," Fitz said with surprising abruptness, and smiled at Hank. "He's wasting his time with me. Keep him as long as you like. And Hank, there's always room at the Bar 33 when you've done."

Hank, inarticulate at his best, only nodded gravely and Major Fitz turned away, after saying good night to Nora. Hank looked over at Johnny, his eyes asking a question, and so did Nora. Johnny knew that both were wanting to ask him now about Major Fitz. If possible, Nora would have asked him if he still thought Major Fitz was the guilty party, after such a gracious acknowledgment as he had made to Turk. And Hank would have asked if this didn't fit in pretty well with what he had felt was coming. But Johnny, more puzzled than both, could not have answered either question yet.

THE room Mrs. Jenkins provided for them at the Cosmos House was in the attic, with the only entrance a ladder and a heavy trap door. Johnny, Hank and Turk went to bed while the town was still drowning its sorrow.

Johnny was first up next morning, and he dressed quietly, thinking over the incidents of the night before. At last, he had the chance and the position to enable him to get at the bottom of Pick's murder. Whoever it was had murdered Pick, they would not get out of the county while they had a chance to get Pick's gold. One of these men fighting him would be Pick's killer. Of that he was certain.

Dressed and yawning widely, Johnny moved over to the trapdoor and shoved away the trunk which he had dragged over it the night before. Lean-

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ing down, he had almost grabbed hold of the ring ready to heave, when he noticed a tiny scattering of shavings around a knothole that was just to one side of the ring. Gently, then, he drew his hand away from the ring and backed off. Lighting a match against the permanent twilight of this room, he knelt down to examine the knothole. In the light it turned out to be not a dark knothole, but twin holes bored close together in the wood of the trapdoor. Gently, Johnny put two fingers in these holes and felt cold steel. He had looked at the business end of enough shotguns to recognize those twin holes. Somebody, during the night, had drilled holes right by the ring, over which a man would have to lean in order to move the heavy trapdoor. In these holes had been inserted two barrels of a shotgun.

Johnny pondered this a long moment. Then he went back and woke up Hank and Turk and brought them over to the trapdoor.

"That's it, all right," Turk murmured. "Let's see how it works."

They lighted the lamp and brought it over beside the ring, and Johnny knelt down to examine it closely. There was another, smaller hole right under the ring, and over the shank of the heavy ring was a tiny fish-hook. From it, a tight wire stretched down through the hole.

Turk whistled in exclamation. "You pick up the ring to heave, that pulls the wire that sets the shotgun off and the next thing you know, your head is plastered on the roof."

"Let's try it," Hank suggested.

"And blow a hole in the roof?" Johnny grinned. "Let's don't. We got a landlady here."

They compromised by prying the trapdoor up without touching the ring. As they had suspected, there was a shotgun underneath. The hole had been drilled so expertly that the gun barrel was wedged tightly in position. The wire was drawn down tautly over the butt and up to the trigger, so that the slightest pull on the ring would have set it off.

After it was dismantled, Johnny said grimly, "There's no sense in anybody else knowin' this. We'll settle this by ourselves when the time comes."

BUT that was the only incident of the day. The town was quieter than usual, and Johnny and his deputies did not molest anybody. They spent the day cleaning out the sheriff's office and getting it ready for their own occupancy. Ex-Sheriff Blue appeared at midday and was entirely amiable. He tendered no advice to Johnny, and Johnny, on his part, asked for none. But as evening drew on and dark fell, there was a noticeable tension in the town.

Little groups of men clustered in the saloons, engaged in a conversation which they were at pains to keep private. Hank, on his rounds, was met with sullen, defiant stares. Nobody offered to buy him drinks. The saloonkeepers, members of a usually wise profession, did not bother to set up drinks and toast the health and long life of a new marshal. Hank had the growing conviction that the town, for once in its mushroom career, was cooperating—and in a way which was merely a gang-up.

He reported this to Johnny late in the evening. Turk, a few moments before, had reported the same thing. Johnny almost wished that he had set the deadline so that it would expire in daylight. It was not reassuring to know that a hundred men, all willing

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and able to shoot, had the protection of night behind them. But a stubbornness in him would not let him admit it to Turk.

Their plan was simple. It would consist of swift raids after midnight. There would be no orderly schedule; suddenness would be the secret. Johnny realized that it was within his authority to deputize as many men as he wished, but if he did that, the hard-cases would fade away until the deputies were dismissed, then return again to plague him. No, it would have to be a swift and sudden showdown. But he took one precaution.

Along in the afternoon, he drifted down to Hugo Miller's place, and to Hugo made this proposition. The three of them could take care of the trouble in the saloons, but what about the street? It would be open, and at the first ripple of excitement would fill with hard-cases. Would Hugo, then, consent to being conscripted as a shotgun guard?

"Shotgun guard where?" Hugo asked, with all good humor.

"If you fort up on the roof of the place we raid, then you're in a position to keep the streets clear if any trouble comes up."

"Sure," Hugo said immediately, so it was decided that he would cover them while they were engaged in their own kind of disciplining.

As midnight drew near, the streets began to empty, which was pretty unusual because night in Cosmos was hardly different from day. Johnny, watching it from the window of the darkened sheriff's office, said to Turk, "They'll be ready for us."

"Where first?" Turk said.

"Prince's Keno Parlor, I think."

Turk faded out into the night, Hugo beside him, a shotgun in his hand. And then that careful silence settled on the town, and it lasted until midnight, when Johnny murmured to Hank, "Come along."

A MAN lounging in the doorway of Prince's Keno Parlor faded back into the room at sight of them. At the swing door, Hank leaned his shotgun against the building, and shoulder to shoulder, they pushed through the doors—to confront the strangest sight either of them had ever seen.

In a line across the room, from bar to sidewall, a row of chairs had been drawn up facing the door. And on each of these chairs a man sat, hands folded on his lap, staring innocently at Johnny and Hank.

In the middle of the group, bulking large and dominant, was Leach Wigran. He was a black, scowling man with a shovel beard down to his collar. His clothes were incredibly dirty. Above a small hooked nose, he had deepset black eyes that never lost their mockery. His great hands folded loosely around the six-gun in his lap gave him the ridiculous appearance of a peaceful child on a chair—which was exactly what he had intended. To Leach's right, his tough face wearing a mocking smile, sat Mickey Hogan, Leach's foreman.

As Johnny let his gaze rove the crowd, Leach Wigran piped up in a falsetto voice, starting a tune which every school child uses to greet his teacher. Only the words were changed, and the whole row of men lifted their mocking voices to join him.

Good morning to you,
Good morning to you,
Good morning, dear Sheriff,
To blazes with you.

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As the song ended, a mighty chorus of laughter roared through the room. Tim Prince, the sour and cynical owner of the place allowed himself a spare smile which Johnny did not miss.

Johnny walked forward a little to stand in front of Wigran.

"Why, Leachie," he said in mocking tones, imitating the inflection of a schoolteacher. "You haven't washed your hands or wiped your nose this morning." Slowly, so that his movement wouldn't be misunderstood, he reached in his hip pocket and drew out a handkerchief, and walked slowly over to the bar. There, he picked up a half-drained schooner of beer and stalked back to confront Leach.

"Well, Leachie," he drawled.

Leach's eyes flickered faintly. He could also see Hank Brender closing the weather doors and leaning against them, shotgun in hand. But Leach Wigran was not a man to be bluffed. He answered in a mincing voice, "Why, teacher, I had my mind so set on bringin' you an apple this mornin' that I plumb forgot. You want to see the apple?"

"Wash your face first, Leachie," Johnny said gently, ominously.

Here was the challenge. Leach said just as gently, "Suppose you try to do it, teacher."

His last word was not out of his mouth before Johnny's foot shot out and kicked Leach's chair. It tipped over and Leach, arms sawing wildly, shot once at the ceiling as Johnny dived on top of him.

Then, inevitably, someone shot out the lights and there was a wild tangle on the floor. Johnny, knowing instinctively that no one would risk gunplay at these close quarters, grappled with Wigran and rolled under him, just as half that milling, shouting, kicking and screaming mob got into action, tangling men and chairs and even women.

Then, over this uproar, came the mighty, deafening blast of a shotgun and the bar mirror simply collapsed in a jangle of glass. Another spot, and the front door boomed hollowly. Here was real panic, for not a man or woman in that room could mistake the message of that shotgun and what it meant. A sudden clangor on the piano, as if a man was stamping on the keys, crashed through the room, and then Turk Hebron's voice lifted above every other sound.

"Prince, light a lantern up there or I'll bust this wall lamp and fire your place!" Turk bellowed. The fighting ceased abruptly.

IN a very few seconds, Prince struck a match, then another, and finally a trembling barkeep came out into the middle of the room and pulled down an overhead lamp and lighted it. The disorder had ceased now. Johnny was in the midst of a dozen of Wigran's men, and he still had a hold on Wigran's collar. Now everybody turned to look for Turk. He was sitting on top the piano, hat pushed back on his head, his shotgun slacked just away from his shoulder.

"Anybody want to try and knock me off here?" he inquired in the sudden silence.

"Or me out of here?" Hank asked. He was planted against the closed doors, a shotgun in his hands.

Johnny laughed quietly. "Line forms at the bar, gents. Put your hardware on it, then get these chairs untangled and take your seats again. I'll give you about twenty seconds to get back to school again."

There was no choice, and Leach

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Wigran was the first to see it. Cursing sulphurously, he put his guns on the bar. In a few moments, the whole room was crowding to the bar. After that, the chairs were pulled upright and a sullen, surly and sheepish crew of men took their seats. Johnny had a smear of blood on his face, and an eye which was rapidly swelling shut, but he was grinning broadly.

"So you bunch of tinhorns thought you could laugh the law out of this town, did you?" he asked, when they were all seated.

No one answered. Johnny addressed himself to Leach, now. "Never give a ranny you want to kill an even break, Leach. Haven't you learned that?" Leach didn't answer. "If I want to kill you, Leach, I will. And I'm loco enough to give you an even break." Paused, he let his hard gaze rove the room and then settled it again on Leach. "What'll it be, Leach? Guns? I'll fight you now, here."

Leach's gaze shifted. He was motionless. "Well, well," Johnny drawled. "You don't like the idea of sassin' teacher back with old man Colt's language. How would you like to settle it with fists, then?"

Leach only shifted faintly in his seat, and did not answer. Johnny looked over the rest of the hard-cases. "Anybody else want to make it guns or fists with teacher?"

Still he got no response. He was carrying the room now in a magnificent mocking bluff. He ran a hand through his hair and scowled. "Maybe you'd like a kickin' contest, Leach. No? Let me see." He pursed his lips. "Get up, Leach," he said finally. Leach hulked out of his chair.

"You too, Mickey," Johnny said to Hogan. Hogan did. Johnny walked over and yanked Hogan's chair out into the middle of the floor and grasped the back of it. Then he said to Leach, "Pick up your chair, Leach. I'm goin' to see if you've got a sign of a brain in that skull of yours. I'll crack it wide open with this chair if I have a chance—and I will."

Leach hesitated for a moment, then picked up his chair and circled out into the cleared space. Johnny, grinning now at the absurd weapons of this fight, came at Leach with chair outthrust, jabbing. Leach raised his chair up and swung it viciously at Johnny's, but Johnny drew his own back and the momentum of the swing carried Leach half way around, exposing his back. Johnny put the legs of his chair in Leach's back and shoved with all his weight and strength and Leach went off balance to sprawl across his chair on the floor. There was a scattering of subdued laughter throughout the room.

Leach rose with a growl of fury and threw his chair at Johnny, who caught it in his own chair. Then Johnny picked it up and threw it back, and Leach, dancing to escape its low sweep, got his feet tangled in the rungs and crashed to the floor again. There was a howl of laughter through the room.

"Give him your chairs," Johnny called to the seated men. He was laughing delightedly now. But Leach could see nothing funny in all this. Impotent, he was cursing in bitter fury, and as each chair skidded out to him, he picked it up and threw it at Johnny. Johnny stopped two of them, ducked the third, and then, still on his knees, saw the spittoon beside the bar rail. Without hesitating a moment, he picked it up and sailed it at Leach. It crashed on the wall behind Leach, and all its contents were dumped over

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Leach's shoulders and clothes. Before Leach could collect his wits, Johnny had vaulted behind the bar and was leveling a barrage of bottles at him. They came fast and furious, breaking on the wall and splashing over Leach, who could not get out of the way. The room was in an uproar of laughter.

When Johnny had hit him a half dozen times, Leach picked up a chair to use it for a shield. Johnny sailed five bottles over Leach's head, and as each one broke, Leach got a fresh bath of whisky, brandy, gin, and rum. Finally, when Leach was cowering against the wall in the front corner, Johnny called to Hank, "Open the door, Hank."

Hank did, and Leach made a dash for it. Johnny had a waiter's tray in his hand, and as Leach was almost to the door, he sailed it, flat, at Leach's head. It hit him a glancing blow, just as he was in the doorway, and the last that laughing crowd saw of Leach Wigran, bully and bucko rustler, was a flash of his boots as he sprawled out onto the sidewalk.

Johnny turned now to confront the rest of the hard-cases. He had a bottle in each hand. "Make a run, boys," he invited. "My aim's improving."

Three of them made a run for the door, and Johnny, laughing himself now, let them have the bottles. They were clean misses, as he had intended, but that did not lessen the stampede for the door. In a very few moments, under that barrage of glassware, the room was cleared of the hard-cases. Only the townspeople and punchers and miners were left. Johnny waited until he heard the pounding of horses' hooves in the streets, and then Hugo, up on the roof, sent a peppering of buckshot at the retreating riders.

JOHNNY'S grin died as he faced Tim Prince, who was regarding the wreckage of his place with a dour poker face.

"How do your bad boys stack up now, Tim?" he asked quietly.

Tim only shook his head.

"Still think they're worth backin'?" Johnny asked him.

"They never was," Tim said dryly. "I don't give credit."

"But as long as you thought they had a chance to lick me, you were on their side. Wasn't that it?"

"Pretty close," Tim said, and spat at a spot where the spittoon had been.

Johnny looked at the mess across the room, the broken chairs, the broken mirror, the shattered door, and then he smiled narrowly. He walked over to Prince. "How would you like to be put under bond to keep the peace, Prince?"

Tim regarded him levelly, and did not speak for a long moment. "I don't think you could do it, Sheriff. You don't *own* the town."

Without turning, Johnny said to Hank, "Go get Stevens, the J. P., Hank."

Hank started for the door when Prince raised a hand. "All right, you could," he said calmly. "I guess this is your town, now, Johnny. What you say goes."

"You guess right," Johnny said. "I'm givin' you your choice, Prince. You hire a bouncer tough enough to keep these hard-cases from makin' trouble in your saloon. When one of that gang comes in—and they'll try it—throw them out. Either do that or I'll put you under bond to keep the peace. And once I do that and one of my deputies walks in here and sees one of these tinhorns in your place. I'll

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shut you down for good and all. What about it?"

Prince threw up both hands and said, "I got a livin' to make here, and why—"

"What about it?" Johnny asked.

Prince shrugged and said, "All right. I'll hire the bouncer. You're the boss now."

Johnny rapped the flat of his palm on the bar and it echoed in that silence. "You will!" he said bluntly. "If you don't I'll run you out of town, Tim. I first laughed Leach Wigran out of town. When you go, nobody'll laugh—not even me—because it won't be a laughing matter."

With that, he signaled to Turk and Johnny and walked out the door. The street was ominously quiet.

"Let's make it the Gem next," Johnny said.

They approached the Gem in the same way they did Prince's, but their reception there was different. The games and drinking were orderly. Only one known hard-case was in the place and he was playing solitaire at a lone table.

Johnny approached him and said, "The curfew's rung, fella. Clear out. Go home to bed."

The man only nodded and rose and went out, and Hank reported that he had ridden out of town. At the bar, Johnny asked the barkeep, "What happened to the bad boys, Jim? It's sort of quiet in here. Quiet's awful noticeable in your place, ain't it?"

"They cleared out," Jim said, and grinned.

The three of them went down the long line of saloons, not skipping one of the twelve. And each one was orderly, with not a known hard-case in the whole crowd. To each saloon-keeper, Johnny made the same proposition that he had made Tim Prince. He said he was going to try and keep the hard-cases out of Cosmos, but he wanted co-operation. They could either hire a bouncer to keep order, or be bonded to keep the peace. And one and all, they agreed to his proposition. They had no alternative.

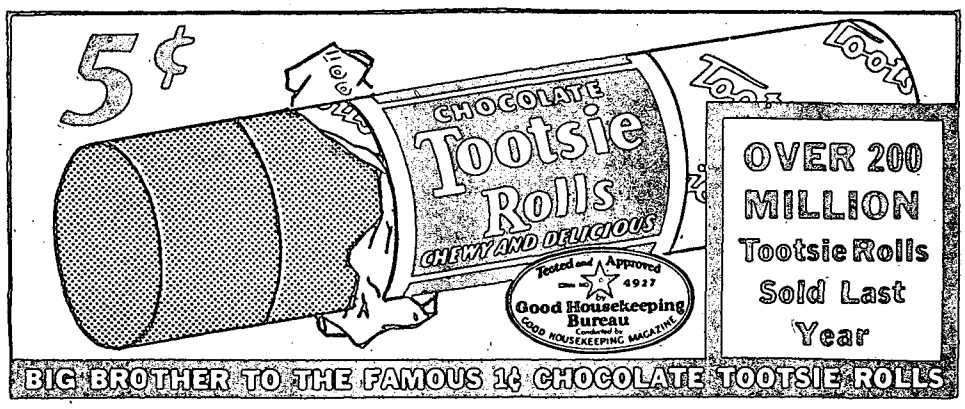
Back at the office, Johnny and Turk and Hank and Hugo looked at each other and grinned.

"Well?" Johnny said.

"They ain't out of the county yet," Hank told him.

"They will be," Johnny said quietly, and that was a promise that he planned to keep.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



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At Noon: BEWARE

By CARL RATHJEN

Author of "Beyond Control," "Confidence Flight," etc.

I

THE message did not come by letter or telegram. Those might be traced. Nor did it come by personal messenger.

It came by telephone. Mr. Gregory H. Rowncliffe, chairman of the board, Euro-American Steamship Lines which ran the largest, fastest, most expensive, most luxurious ocean liners, had acted quickly when his first amazement and shock were over. Covering the mouthpiece he had ordered one secretary to trace the call. Calmly, very calmly, he ordered another to communicate with the police. And a third, he ordered to listen in on another telephone.

But none of that helped. The telephone company could not trace the call to any one number. It appeared that whoever made the call to Mr. Rowncliffe had used a repairman's dial transmitter, obviously stolen, and had simply climbed a pole somewhere, hooked into a line and dialed the number of the Euro-American Steamship office.

"What," shouted the lieutenant, "what are you standing on?"

It was all very perplexing, and more than disturbing. The police said the message was from a crank. But Mr. Rowncliffe was not so certain that it was. The voice on the telephone had been calm, assured. A crank is usually irate, aroused.

The police had another theory, a good old stand-by for situations like this. Labor trouble, they claimed. What had Mr. Rowncliffe's company done to irritate the longshoremen's or seamen's unions? Nothing. All was peaceful on the waterfront and the high seas.

It must be a crank then, the police

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reiterated. Cranks were pretty harmless.

"But naturally," said the inspector from headquarters, "we will take every precaution. Will you write as exact a copy of that message as you can remember."

But Gregory H. Rowncliffe was too busy an executive to tax his energies with the process of penmanship. He rarely did more than sign his name, and more often than not a secretary did that for him. He pressed a button, and as usual, not more than two seconds later, a secretary trotted in with ready pad and sharpened pencil.

Mr. Rowncliffe closed his eyes a moment. Finally he spoke in a deep, cultured voice, such as befitted the head of the Euro-American Steamship Lines.

"The voice on the telephone said, quote: 'Mr. Rowncliffe, it would be most advisable for the safety of your new super-liner, the *Empress,* if you were to have two hundred thousand dollars dropped overboard from the *Countess* when she is five miles eastward of Ambrose Lightship tomorrow morning at ten o'clock. The money must be in small unmarked bills of denominations no larger than twenty dollars. The serial numbers must not be consecutive. If you fail to comply with any one of these instructions the *Empress* will most certainly be sunk at her pier in the North River. If you fail to comply, she will be sunk at noon. If you ignore this message, remember, at noon, beware!' End of quote," finished Mr. Rowncliffe. "Type three copies and give one to the police."

The police inspector glanced at Mr. Rowncliffe.

"I hope you haven't planned to drop the money from the *Countess.*"

"Certainly not," replied Mr. Rowncliffe. "I don't believe in extortion. Still I can't help but feel this message is authentic. The speaker seemed too assured, not at all what one might term a crank."

The telephone rang. Mr. Rowncliffe reached for it languidly. "Hello," he said, and a moment later motioned, not exactly in a dignified, cultured manner, for the inspector to get on the other telephone.

"Mr. Rowncliffe," said the voice, that same voice, "in case you doubted that we can make good on the threat in that previous message I would suggest that you swivel about and gaze from the south window of your office. Do you see that small freighter anchored a quarter mile southeast of the Statue of Liberty? Well watch it. It will be sunk in exactly one hour from now. I say one hour in order that you may warn the police to remove everyone aboard it. We do not wish to take unnecessary lives, but we do wish to be certain that you shall pay us. Hence this, shall we say, dress rehearsal of what will occur to the *Empress* if you do not pay. Don't fail us, or else at noon tomorrow, beware."

The inspector of police swore. "Trace that call," he yelled to no one in particular. "Someone get me the harbor police on another phone." He glanced at his watch. "One hour, eh? If there's anything to this we'll nip it in the bud. We'll be all set for anything in one hour. Then let them try. . . ."

RUSTY McGUIRE, skipper of the tiny freighter, *Scalomania,* spat a rusty brown jet in the general direction of the side and grinned at the lieutenant of the New York Marine police.

"You're kind of grown up and kind of late for April fool jokes, ain't you?" he grinned. "Who'd want to blow up this hunk of rust?"

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"We don't know and we're not taking any chances," frowned the lieutenant. "We're taking off everyone aboard this vessel."

"That's the only way you'll get us off," smiled Rusty. "And it won't be easy."

"What do you mean, that's the only way?" retorted the lieutenant.

"Just what I said," Rusty remarked. "You'll have to take us off. We ain't leaving for any cock and bull story that's been cooked up to give you still-water seamen a little something to do besides cruising around the harbor."

"But I'm telling you—" the lieutenant tried to explain.

"No," laughed Rusty, raising a thick, rusty forearm to shove back the greasy cap on his head. "No," he said, "I'm telling you. We've fought off Chinese river pirates and buffaloed a tin-plated warship off Spain that tried to draw us into the argument over there, and I'll be damned if any harbor traffic cop is gonna tell me I can't take care of my own boat."

"No use arguing with you," growled the lieutenant. He reached for Rusty and something that looked like Rusty's fist and had the force of a dum-dum bullet exploded against his chest. He slid on his back for some four feet, that is, after he landed. Sitting up he pawed at his leather holster.

"Don't," smiled Rusty, but there was an iciness in his blue eyes which made the lieutenant countermand the impulse directing his hand.

"Well," he grumbled, rising "you've been warned. If you want to commit suicide . . ."

"I don't," said Rusty. "And there isn't any man going to make me to. And anyone who thinks he's gonna sink my ship has to best me first, and that ain't never been done."

The lieutenant went down the Jacob's ladder. Rusty scowled over the side. Six police boats ringed his freighter. Beyond them, to the east, the north, and the south, three coast guard cutters from Stapleton on Staten Island scouted about and shunted away all craft that might come near the *Scalomania.* Overhead a police amphibian circled like a hawk.

Rusty snorted. "You'd think this was some sissy of a lily-white yacht," he growled to no one in particular. "G'wan, beat it," he motioned angrily to the guard of honor. "Your propellers are stirrin' up the muck from the bottom."

But those boats clung grimly to their positions. On the police boats men stood alert with Tommy guns and repeating rifles. Farther off on the Coast Guard cutters men were removing the canvas shields from the mounted guns.

THE police lieutenant appeared with a megaphone and yelled across to Rusty.

"I'm coming back," he shouted. "We're going to search for bombs below your decks."

Rusty simply hauled up the ladder. "I know my own ship," he bellowed. "The mate's searching now just to be sure." He turned as the mate appeared. "Well?"

"Nothing," said the mate.

Rusty scowled at the encircling boats again. Maybe there was something to this. Ten more minutes before the hour was up. He faced toward his nondescript crew assembled by the forward hatch.

"In the jams we've been in," he muttered, "staying with the ship was the only way to get out with whole necks. This is different. If any of you want

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to leave it's okay by me."

"How about breaking out the guns, Rusty," suggested one man.

Rusty grinned. "Okay," he said, handing a key to the mate. "You know your stations."

Five minutes to go. Four minutes. Three. Two. *One.*

Rusty's short, beefy arms cradled a sub-machine gun. He glanced about. On the forward deck the mate and two seamen had set up and were manning a brass one-pounder. The past twenty minutes one of the Coast Guard cutters had been darting about nervously, ordering all moving craft out of the harbor. It returned now to its former position.

The minute was up. There was no sound at all except the drone of the police plane overhead, and no boat close by except those of the police and Coast Guard. But what could get by the alert, watching eyes on all these craft?

"These New York natives," muttered Rusty, "always did strike me as having a chronic case of jitters. Getting all worked up because some guy telephones and says he's—"

The deck tilted up suddenly and slammed his face. That happened an instant before Rusty heard the roar of the explosion. The ship shuddered beneath him. He twisted his bruised face from the grimy, gritty deck. From over the side, water and jagged pieces of steel were still shooting skyward, sideways, outward.

Rusty cursed savagely. No one could do this to his boat and expect to get away with it. He grabbed up the sub-machine gun and charged. Off to starboard the police boats tossed frantically in the mad rush of waves away from the *Scalomania.* The mast of one was cut off cleanly. Steel, like a quivering barb, stabbed into the cabin of another. A policeman floundered in the water. Others climbed dazedly to their feet, swiveling about with ready guns. The Coast Guard cutters wheeled and charged in.

But there was no target.

Water and steel drummed and clanged down about Rusty. He hunched his shoulders and squinted. His big red hands whitened about the gun. Just give him a sight of the raiders . . .

But there weren't any.

II

THE police plane snarled down and rocketed about in widening circles, vainly seeking its quarry. Like crazy water bugs the police boats scooted about, searching.

A seaman, his eyes blinded by blood, crawled toward Rusty. Another, clutching his torn shoulder, his left arm dangling, staggered into view. Another raced wild-eyed to Rusty.

"The side's torn out," he shouted. "The whole harbor's pouring into the ship." Then he recoiled, staring at the look on Rusty's face.

Rusty spun about, lowered his head, and pounded to the port side—the side opposite where the explosion had taken place. Maybe the attackers had fled to that side after doing their job. Rusty swept the mute, ready muzzle of the sub-machine gun about in an arc from bow to stern. But there was no target. The *Scalomania* lurched beneath him and listed to starboard.

"Hanson!" roared Rusty to the mate. "Round up the crew."

They gathered by the forward hatch, an angry, white-faced, bewildered group, clutching unused guns, improvising bandages for the wounded.

"Any missing—or killed?" Rusty demanded curtly.

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"None," replied Hanson.

"Ahoy there," the lieutenant of police bellowed through a megaphone. "Better let us take you off. Your ship's settling fast."

Steam roared from the funnel as water reached the fires. In another moment the boilers would go. Rusty swore.

There was anger in his carefully chosen blasphemies—the anger of a powerful man suddenly made helpless.

"Abandon ship," he ordered reluctantly, and motioned to a police boat to come for them. No one said anything. The men shuffled to the side awkwardly. Rusty scowled darkly. This was the first time he had ever given that order. Typhoon, fire aboard ship, hurricane, the black pampero off Argentina, tidal waves, none of them had ever made him give that order. He'd fought through them all. Chinese river pirates, revolutionists in Central America, a gunboat off hell-torn Spain, he'd held his ship against them all. And now some unseen, some nameless raider had made him—

"Coming, McGuire?" called the police lieutenant.

Rusty climbed down the Jacob's ladder. The police boat surged away from the sinking *Scalomania.* The boilers went with a splintering roar. The *Scalomania* rolled wearily on her side. Water closed over her, eddied for a few moments, then became placid.

The police lieutenant seemed to have forgotten that Rusty had knocked him down.

"Tough luck," he consoled Rusty. His voice hardened. "But we'll get those rats."

"They're not rats, mister," Rusty said slowly. "At least not one of them. A guy couldn't be a rat and be smart enough to get the best of me. He'd have to have brains for that. He must be a very shrewd guy. I'd like to meet him, see just what he's like before—" Rusty's voice shook— "before I put my hands on him."

HYSTERICAL headlines darkened the front pages of newspapers. No one knew how Rusty's ship had been sunk, but vivid imaginations gave birth to all manner of wild tales. They hinted at mysterous rays and war machines dealing death from a distance. A more conservative paper suggested that a stratosphere airplane had dropped a bomb. Another said that perhaps a diver had walked out beneath the ship from the Jersey shore. But no one knew, actually.

Rusty McGuire questioned closely those members of his crew who had been stationed near the spot where the explosion occurred. But no one could tell him anything.

All night long he paced the streets, seeking some explanation. All night long police boats and Coast Guard cutters with probing searchlights patrolled the North River around the pier where the *Empress* was docked. Police closed the elevated highway that ran past the pier. They roped off the street below for three blocks. No one could enter without a pass issued by Police Headquarters. A minute search was made of every inch of the *Empress.* In the morning divers were lowered to examine her underwater plates.

They found nothing.

A little before nine the *Empress's* smaller sister ship, the *Countess,* which was supposed to carry the two hundred thousand dollars the raiders had demanded, gave a mournful blast from her whistle and backed into the river. She turned and started for Europe—

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for Ambrose Lightship. But she carried *no* two hundred thousand dollars for the unknown extortionists.

Two Coast Guard cutters convoyed her down the river. At the Battery a light cruiser from the Brooklyn navy yard scouted ahead. Its guns were ready for action.

Back by the *Empress* two cruisers knifed up the river and anchored in midstream above and below the liner. At eleven o'clock police ordered the nearby Weehawken ferries to stop running. In the new tunnel under the river at Thirty-Eighth Street workmen lay down their tools and hurried out.

At eleven-thirty another inspection was made of the *Empress*. Divers were lowered again and remained submerged until ten minutes to twelve. No boats were permitted within one mile of the pier. Overhead at all levels army and navy planes prowled the skies. A National Guardsman anti-aircraft unit set up its guns on the elevated highway. Plain-clothesmen and undercover men swarmed along both sides of the river, including the piers. Aboard a police boat Rusty McGuire, flanked by the lieutenant of police, held a sub-machine gun. An army of police guarded the shore approaches to the *Empress*. A fleet of some twenty armed craft guarded the river. No precaution was overlooked.

And at twelve o'clock there was an explosion, and the *Empress* began to sink by her pier.

III

"SHREWD, damn shrewd," muttered Rusty McGuire, staring at the sinking *Empress*. "I've got an idea," he slowly informed the lieutenant.

"What is it?"

"There's one chance in a billion of winning through," Rusty mused.

"What is it?" demanded the lieutenant. "No matter what the odds we've got to take it. What is it?"

"It will take a fast-thinking man of action to try it," Rusty murmured. Then his jaw jutted and his rusty head seemed to set more firmly on his powerful neck. "And I'm the man to try it," he declared. "Get this boy-scout boat under way. I want to have a little talk with Rowncliffe."

He would say nothing more to anyone until he was taken to the office where Mr. Gregory H. Rowncliffe, very pale of complexion and dazed about the eyes, still maintained the hauteur, the dignified, down-the-nose pose befitting the chairman of the board of the Euro-American Steamship Lines. He offered no one a chair, least of all Rusty McGuire. For just the briefest instant his gaze flickered downward to Rusty's heavy, scuffed shoes. And perhaps he made a mental note to order the deep pile rug sent to the cleaners after Rusty's departure.

"I got an idea, see," Rusty explained, slapping the desk and leaving a big moist palm-print on the superbly polished surface.

"How interesting," murmured the Mr. Rowncliffe, watching the palm-print evaporate from his desk. And he said it as though he meant: "How uninteresting."

The inspector of police scowled. "Come on, McGuire, spill it."

Mr. Rowncliffe, for the merest instant, appeared alarmed as though he fully expected Rusty to spill something.

Rusty grimaced. "I'll spill it when I'm good and ready. First, I gotta get this guy out of his trance so I'm sure he hears me."

Mr. Rowncliffe glanced around,

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seeking the gentleman in a trance. He noted all eyes were upon him. He raised his eyebrows at Rusty. "Well?" he inquired.

"Listen," said Rusty, sitting on the desk and leaning confidentially toward Mr. Rowncliffe, "if I make good in what I'm going to try—if I stop these blow-ups—you're to outfit me with another freighter. And another thing, my crew lost its pay because my ship was sunk. Before I even start you gotta agree to pay them what they would have gotten. What do you say?"

Mr. Rowncliffe allowed just the suggestion of a frown to appear. "That seems rather a stiff price," he declared.

Rusty snorted. "It's loose change in the pocket to what you'll have to spend refloating the *Empress*."

"Hmm," Mr. Rowncliffe hm-ed. "Very well," he agreed finally. "What is your proposal?"

"You got another phone call this morning right after the explosion, didn't you?" said Rusty. "You're supposed to dump some dough overboard from the *Duchess* tomorrow afternoon, right?"

"Ri— That is correct," Mr. Rowncliffe verified.

"Okay." Rusty's blue eyes sparkled. "Just as you were ordered you'll have a drum dumped off the *Duchess*."

"Nothing doing," barked the police inspector, "that sort of thing fosters crime. Kidnaping survived because—"

"I won't pay extortion," declared Mr. Rowncliffe.

"Don't weigh your anchors without steam in your boilers," cut in Rusty. "How's about letting me finish. A drum will be dumped off the *Duchess* tomorrow just as you were ordered. But instead of the money, I'll be in it!"

"What?" everyone chorused.

"I'll be in that drum," repeated Rusty.

"You!" said the inspector incredulously. Even Mr. Rowncliffe's eyebrows wig-wagged amazement. "You're crazy," barked the inspector. "You'd be murdered two seconds after that drum was opened."

"I'm very hard to kill," Rusty declared.

"It's idiotic," insisted the inspector. "You couldn't possibly expect to accomplish anything. Rowncliffe, I'm sorry I've wasted your time and mine when I could have been out working on—"

"Working on what?" jeered Rusty. "You know you ain't got a single clue or chance to stop another blow-up like this morning's." (The inspector didn't say a word.) "I'm offering you the only chance you've got," continued Rusty. "It's one in a billion, but it's the only one so far. Maybe I can grab that one chance and get to the leader of the gang —the brains. Figure it out. I won't be killed right off. Whoever opens that drum is going to have one hell of a jolt. It'll give me time to sort of size things up and figure an angle."

"I can't let you do it," muttered the inspector. "It's suicide."

"What'll you call it," asked Rusty, "if a ship is blown up with people aboard it?" He faced Mr. Rowncliffe. "What do you say?"

"It appears to be our only chance," replied Rowncliffe. "And if McGuire is willing to make the sacrifice . . ."

Rusty shifted uncomfortably. "Don't use that word till we see how things turn out. And don't forget our agreement about my crew's pay and another freighter for me."

"WE'RE four miles past Ambrose lightship now," said the captain of the *Duchess*.

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Rusty glanced about. Not another boat was nearby. Not a plane was in the sky. Nothing broke the surface of the water. Maybe he was crazy to do this. The man he was going to try to reach was shrewd, very shrewd. Hadn't he been the first man ever to get the best of Rusty by blowing up his ship? Maybe Rusty was too sure of himself. Why go ahead with this? After all what did he owe Rowncliffe or the police? Nothing.

"Okay," muttered Rusty, "guess I'd better be getting in the drum."

It was a big drum, somewhat crudely padded inside, and it had several features not to be found in the usual drum. Rusty stepped in and squatted down. The drum hadn't seemed as cramped as this when he climbed in yesterday afternoon before having the police mechanics in the repair shop go to work on it. Near his feet a small oxygen tank was secured firmly with steel bands.

"All right," said Rusty, "give me the wrench. Okay, put the gasket in place and slip on the cover." He thought the word "gasket" sounded a lot like an unpleasant word with a different first letter.

"Good luck," said the captain of the *Duchess*. "All right, men, put the cover on."

Rusty bolted it on tightly from the *inside*. That was going to be a big factor in his effort to grab that one chance in a billion. After the drum was picked up if he could get out before an attempt was made to open it. . .

He banged three times on the side with the wrench. Three blows came in reply. Then he braced himself as he felt the drum being lifted.

With an ear-shattering impact it rolled in the liner's wake. But Rusty crashed into the sea. It twisted and settled all his weight in one section and soon the rolling stopped. He adjusted the oxygen tank and opened a small vent to let out the close air.

There was nothing to do now but wait, and think. And his thoughts seemed to have a pessimistic will of their own. What if the oxygen failed before the raiders came? In that case, before he would be able to remove all the bolts holding the cover, water would rush in, the drum would sink, and he would drown. Even now the water outside forayed hungrily against the drum.

No police or Coast Guard boats, no planes, were in the vicinity. There was nothing to make the raiders fear to approach the drum. But suppose they were afraid and did not come? How long would the police or Coast Guard wait before coming to seek the drum?

He had to stop those thoughts; they would only bring on panic. He concentrated on what he might do when he was face to face with the raiders, but he could form no definite plans until he knew what odds were against him.

TIME seemed to loiter, but it could not have been more than fifteen minutes later when he heard something bump against the drum. His hand shot up and closed the vent. He cut off the oxygen. The hiss might arouse suspicion if that bump was caused by the raiders.

The bump was not repeated. It must have been just a piece of driftwood. Rusty reached toward the oxygen tank again. He did not open the valve, for something slid and clanked over the drum. He felt it lifted suddenly, and he braced hard against the ends so his body could not shift and betray his presence. Voices muttered outside. Rusty felt for the reassuring bulge of

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the automatic under his shoulder.

There seemed to be some difficulty working the drum aboard the—whatever it was out there. Rusty gripped the wrench firmly. He'd have to work fast to get out. He'd start loosening the bolts as soon as the drum was set down.

It was set down, but Rusty swore softly. The drum was stood on end, *with his head down*. He'd never be able to get out from this position.

If only the boat, or whatever it was, would get under way. Then he could try to tip the drum. The men out there would think the motion of the boat, airplane, or whatnot had caused it. At last he felt vibration.

Pressing his cramped legs against one side of the drum he suddenly jerked them across to the other side. The drum did not budge. His body slipped, jamming his head and shoulders down tighter. He tried again—and again. The drum might as well have been cemented down for all the effect he obtained.

His chin dug into his chest. The air was getting close, but he dared not touch the oxygen tank. Perspiration soaked his clothes. Ran up his cheeks into his eyes. They smarted. His breathing was harsh. He wondered why the men outside did not hear it.

Resting, he felt a slight sway. Waves. He lay still, getting the feel of them. He began swinging his legs to the rhythm of the sway. The drum started rocking. He wrenched his weight across. He thought his neck would crack. The drum balanced uncertainly. It crashed over and rolled. The din was deafening.

Outside voices shouted.

Though panting, Rusty smiled gratefully as the drum was stood up again and his weight settled back on his feet. Rusty pressed an ear to the metal, but the voices were just rumbles.

He felt for a bolt and guided the wrench onto it. Easy now, if a bolt squeaked, if the wrench slipped . . . He used the wrench only to work off the first tightness, then he twisted the bolts with his fingers.

A metallic clatter vibrated from outside. Tools. The men were going to work on the drum. Rusty gripped the bolts tighter and spun them off. The end of a crowbar jammed in under the cover. It gashed the back of Rusty's hand. One bolt still held the cover by the bar. But the cover raised slightly on the opposite side.

A deep, heavy voice spoke.

"Shift to the other side," it commanded.

The crowbar was withdrawn. Rusty's heart hammered. Frantically he spun off the last bolt. Just another second now and everything might be over for him. He had been crazy to suggest this crack-brained plan. But he was here, he had to play it through. Would he be shrewd enough to outwit the leader of those men outside the drum?

Gripping the gun in his right hand, he punched up with his left fist. The cover flipped away. Rusty popped up.

"Hold it!" he barked. "Don't anybody move!"

THE glare of the single bulb lighting what appeared to be a small cabin was dazzling after the darkness of the drum. He could not see anything for a moment. Would the shock of his appearance save him from the men until he could blink sight into his eyes? He squinted hard and swept the gun about menacingly.

Blurred figures took form, became more distinct. Bulging eyes, slack jaws. They were sharper now. Expressions

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were dazed, terrified, astonished; only one was calm.

"Hold it," repeated Rusty. "You, with the crowbar, step around there to the others."

Four men stood before him. The man with the crowbar was blond, bluntly built. He obeyed numbly. A thin man beside him dropped a short tool and raised his arms. Near them a swarthy fellow let his hand waver toward his lapel.

The fourth man, towering, massively over-sized with muscle, glanced at him sharply.

"Don't, Tony," he cautioned in a deep, heavy voice. "Do you want to commit suicide? Leave this to me." His eyes, blue, as expressionless as glass and as cold, returned to Rusty. "It's still your move," he said. "I assume you did not bring the money."

His massive hands hung loosely at his side.

Rusty grinned. "Rowncliffe couldn't get the dough together on such short notice," he said dryly. He had to figure some way to get his legs out of the drum and still keep the group covered. It was not going to be easy. The drum rose as high as his chest. Even if he made them turn their backs while he climbed out they might be desperate enough to whirl with flaming guns, but that was the chance he had to take.

"Clasp your hands behind your heads," ordered Rusty. He drew in a deep, nervous breath.

They obeyed slowly, carefully. Rusty swerved his gun toward Tony, the swarthy one. Tony made certain to keep his hand well away from the lapel of his coat.

"All right," said Rusty. "Turn your backs to me, and *keep those hands clasped!*"

They turned. And as the tall man's shoulder pivoted Rusty saw beyond him a narrow corridor leading from a partially opened door. He glimpsed just the vague face of a dim figure. Not enough to shoot at. The tall man blocked the way. But he also shielded Rusty.

A gun barked in the corridor. The single light above Rusty shattered. Darkness plunged into the cabin. Rusty jerked his body backward, tipping the drum. Falling, he twisted and landed on his hands. He crawled, scrambling away from the drum. From where Tony had been standing orange flame lanced the dark three times. The cabin shook with the roars.

RUSTY did not return the fire. That would give his position away. He wouldn't stand a chance with the guns of the five men seeking him.

"Hold it, Tony!" barked the tall man. "Spread out everyone, but hold your fire. You, from the drum, give yourself up. You haven't a chance otherwise."

Rusty did not reply. He squirmed on his stomach along the base of the wall to the side. This was bad, very bad. But maybe he could still grab that one chance in a billion.

"Krantzman," growled a voice, "I'm gonna cut loose. It's the only way to get him."

"I'm giving the orders, Tony," replied Krantzman, the tall calm man with the deep voice. "Joe, kick the door open wide. Get back to the wheel where you can't be hit and switch on the light in the corridor. Unless he gives himself up he'll be in the light, a target, while we're in the darkness. Do you understand, you from the drum?"

A silent moment passed . . .

Rusty squirmed out to the center of

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the room. "Okay," he muttered. "Don't shoot."

A moment later a wedge of light glowed from the corridor. Krantzman and his men were in the darkness along the wall to either side of the doorway.

"Throw your gun toward the door," Krantzman commanded—Rusty obeyed—"Now keep him covered," said Krantzman. He fumbled in a locker, then strode to the center of the cabin and put a new bulb in the socket overhead.

Rusty glanced toward the man and rose slowly. Krantzman holstered his gun evidently confident that his strength was ample protection. Rusty had never seen such splaying hands or shoulders with such chunks of muscle. Usually an over-size man like this was dull-witted, but Krantzman's blue eyes were alert, not just with physical, animal alertness, but with shrewdness and intelligence.

"Well," demanded Krantzman, "why did you come? I only saved you temporarily because you might have brought some message. So, if you have anything to say, be quick about it. You've got just about sixty seconds to live."

Rusty smiled grimly. "Why should I tell you then, if I have anything to say?"

"That's entirely up to you," Krantzman suggested. "Whether or not you speak makes no difference to me. I'm only interested in making Rowncliffe pay as he was ordered. So long as he continues to be stubborn I will continue to sink his liners. Well?"

Rusty did not reply immediately. The boat—he was certain it was some sort of boat—must be small to require only five men, six at the most. There could not be more, otherwise the shots would have attracted them.

Rusty was aware that Krantzman was studying him.

"That knowledge will not help you," intimated Krantzman. "Are you going to speak before I—"

"Yeah," said Rusty. Had he met his match at last? Krantzman *was* shrewd to guess that Rusty was considering the number of men aboard the boat. It would not be easy to outwit this man.

"I CAME," said Rusty slowly, "for the reason I told you before. Rowncliffe couldn't get the dough together on such short notice so he sent me to—"

Krantzman shook his big head. "Stop bluffing. Rowncliffe could have sent a note, instead of sending a man to his death. And in an emergency like this he could have secured that amount of money. Are you going to tell me the real reason, or—" Krantzman's big bony features smiled slightly, smugly, "—or should I tell you?"

Rusty grinned. "Suppose you tell me," he stalled.

Krantzman smiled, but only with the lower part of his face. "I like your nerve," he said. "I liked it the day before yesterday when I saw you refuse to leave the ship in the harbor."

Rusty frowned incredulously. There hadn't been any possible way for Krantzman to see him that day. "You saw me?" he asked.

Krantzman nodded. "And yesterday, too, when all those policemen were so proud and certain they were going to protect the *Empress*. I know now you have only one reason for being here. You are seeking vengeance, right?"

"You're telling it," hedged Rusty.

"And I'm telling it right," Krantzman snapped decisively. "Don't try to bluff me, or throw us off guard. You

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haven't a chance. I admire your courage, but unfortunately for you my personal interests come before such a petty thing as admiration. And unfortunately for a lot of innocent people, Rowncliffe by his stubbornness is forcing me to sink an incoming liner to show him I really mean business."

"You'll never sink it," declared Rusty.

Krantzman laughed. The men behind him smiled.

"We sank the *Empress* yesterday," reminded Krantzman. "We sank it in spite of all the precautions."

"But you won't sink the incoming liner," Rusty maintained. "I'm going to stop you."

One of the men, Tony, edged forward. "He's just stalling. Let's give it to him now."

A vein in Rusty's head seemed to wrench with every beat of his heart. His breathing was shallow. "Okay, I have been stalling," he said crisply. "So let me have it, and make it fast if the time's anywhere close to ten o'clock."

Everyone stared at him, Krantzman the most probingly of all. "That's odd for you to say," he suggested, "after what you just said about stopping us from sinking the liner."

"Both those things I said," Rusty insisted, "still hold. You'll never sink the liner. And now, for the luva Pete, kill me and get it over with."

"You're trying to pull something clever, but it won't work," said Krantzman. He reached toward his shoulder holster.

But Tony had been glancing around uneasily. "Wait a minute. What's he mean by that ten o'clock business?"

Rusty rubbed his sweaty palms against his trousers. "Come on," he shouted at Krantzman. "Kill me. I don't want to die the way all of you are going to die."

"That's my intention," promised Krantzman. "Your bluff isn't working. You want us to believe you brought a time bomb with you, is that it? I'm not that childish."

"Wait," Tony shrieked, grabbing Krantzman's arm. "He might have. He had time to hide it when the light was out. We gotta find it, or make him tell." Globules of sweat formed on his brow.

IV

THE short blond man ran to the drum. Gingerly he began stripping the inside of it, the padding, the oxygen tank. He tapped the tank lightly, very lightly, and listened to the sound of the taps. Then he opened the valve, and closed it again.

"He's bluffing," the man declared.

"Haven't I been trying to tell you that?" growled Krantzman.

"Tell them again," barked Rusty. "And trigger that gun. I want to be dead before this boat rips to pieces."

"No!" Tony and the thin man shouted together. "Wait," Tony quavered to Krantzman. "If he was bluffing would he want you to kill him? You know damn well he wouldn't. He'd try to bluff, bargain his way out. But blast it, Krantzman, this guy's asking for death!"

Krantzman's glance went beyond Rusty for a brief moment. There was a shininess to his face that had not been apparent before. Rusty watched him closely. Was the big man beginning to believe him?

Maybe Krantzman's assurance was ebbing, maybe not. Still he gave Rusty no opportunity to take him unawares as they waited while the men pawed

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feverishly through the lockers. It was a long agonizing wait for Rusty.

When the search was finished, what then?

If only he wasn't so helpless. He glanced away from Krantzman. The stripped drum, goaded by the sway of the boat, rolled back and forth between the wall and the padding on the floor. The oxygen tank, wedged between some bolts from the drum, was nearly struck each time the drum rolled by. Close to Rusty's feet lay the crowbar. Rusty shifted his glance quickly away.

"Krantzman," called Tony hoarsely. "We can't find it. We'd better leave the boat."

"Nonsense," snapped Krantzman. "I told you it was a bluff."

"I'm not bluffing," cut in Rusty, holding Krantzman's gaze and prodding the crowbar with the toe of his shoe. "I'm not bluffing when I tell you to kill me so I won't have to die the way you will."

Krantzman laughed. Rusty shoved the crowbar a little nearer that rolling drum.

"Have you any idea of the time?" Krantzman demanded. "It's after ten o'clock. None of you figured that, did you? I let you search anyway so you'd be satisfied."

Tony scowled doubtfully. He went to the doorway. "Hey, Joe," he called. "What time is it?"

"Five after ten."

Krantzman thumbed his gun. Rusty stared at Krantzman, but from the corner of his eye he watched that rolling drum. He prodded the crowbar a little more.

"Hold it a second, Krantzman. I still say you won't sink that liner. You've got less than a minute to live. That bomb was set for *six after ten.*" The drum rolled from the wall. On the return trip it might . . . it had to. Rusty's eyes held Krantzman's. "Do you think I came just to have myself blown up?" he said. "I told you ten o'clock because I thought I'd get the best of you and have time to kill the bomb."

The drum struck the crowbar, swiveled slightly and started back toward the wall.

Krantzman sneered.

"You are clever, fast-thinking, but you can't bluff me any . . ."

The rolling drum struck the valve of the oxygen tank and turned it. A loud hiss filled the room.

"There it goes!" shouted Rusty.

THE men cringed. Krantzman turned his head toward the hiss. Rusty, shoulders braced against the wall, lashed out with his foot and rammed it into Krantzman's stomach. The big man was lifted from the floor and hurled backward, knocking over the thin man.

Tony whirled toward Rusty. But, before he could shoot, Rusty's mallet of a fist crashed against the side of his head and Rusty's free hand snatched away Tony's gun.

"Hold it, everyone," he barked.

His voice cut across the clamor of combat like a whip lashing a naked human back.

The short blond man obeyed. Krantzman sprawled on the floor, fired. But the thin man, floundering to his feet, spoiled the shot.

"Drop it, Krantzman!" Rusty ordered.

Krantzman swore and swerved the revolver back toward Rusty. The gun in Rusty's hand roared twice. Krantzman's arm dropped. His deep chest seemed to collapse as the last breath sighed from him. Rusty, keeping everyone in view, side-stepped to face the

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doorway. He fired once more. There was a clatter in the narrow corridor. A man stumbled out, clutching his shattered wrist.

"Trying to shoot out the light again, eh?" said Rusty. "You can only pull that trick once with me." He glanced down at Tony. "On your feet! Forget that hissing. It's only the oxygen coming out of the tank."

"Then it was a bluff," snarled Tony, his gaze traveling to a gun lying near him. The thin man, still on the floor beside Krantzman's body, had one of his hands near Krantzman's gun.

"Yeah," replied Rusty. "It was a bluff, and if you think I'm bluffing now with this gun in my hand just call me."

His eyes were amused and triumphant, but still wary, still calculating as they traveled quickly over the faces before him. His expression was that of a gambler looking around the table, fairly sure of success, but not wishing to take a dubious risk.

Tony and the thin man exchanged glances. The short blond, off to one side, stared uncertainly from his companions to Rusty.

THE lieutenant of the harbor police, cradling a sub-machine gun in his arms, stood on the forward deck of the big police boat cruising beyond Ambrose Lightship.

"Every time I see the shadow of a wave," he muttered to the man at his side, "I think it's the drum. I wish it was. They should never have let Rusty McGuire do it. He's probably dead by now."

"Ahoy, lieutenant!" boomed Rusty McGuire's voice.

It seemed to come from nowhere at all—yet it was far too cheerful and cocky to belong to a visitor from beyond the grave.

The lieutenant started. His hopeful eyes scanned the water, but all they saw was—water, water and sky. The lieutenant frowned. He did not believe in ghosts, voices from the dead, but . . .

"Did you hear that?" he muttered to the bewildered man at his side. The man nodded.

"Ahoy, lieutenant, this is McGuire. You look too anxious with that chatter gun. Hold your fire and tell your men to do the same."

The lieutenant glanced at his alert, tense crew. Again his eyes probed the unbroken expanse of water and sky. This might be a trap of some sort. Maybe Rusty McGuire had been captured and was being forced to . . . No, not McGuire. He'd die rather than be used as a decoy.

"Hold your fire," the lieutenant commanded. "Okay, McGuire," he shouted. "Where are you?"

"Over here," laughed Rusty.

"There!" gasped the man beside the lieutenant. "Off to port. But how the devil . . ."

Fifty yards off to port Rusty grinned at them. Only his head appeared above the water.

"Port the helm. Toss him a line," ordered the lieutenant.

"Never mind the line," laughed Rusty.

And then the lieutenant nearly dropped the machine gun, for Rusty's entire body appeared, erect, walking, *walking on water*.

"What . . ." shouted the lieutenant. "What are you *standing* on?"

"A boat," Rusty replied, grinning. "What you might call an 'invisible' boat. Snap out of it, lieutenant, hoist up your jaw. Reverse your motors, you'll ram into my boat."

Bewildered, the lieutenant ordered

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the motors reversed. He scowled at Rusty.

"What the devil is it, McGuire, a submarine?"

"Nope," called Rusty.

"A new type of camouflage?" demanded the lieutenant.

"Maybe, maybe not," Rusty taunted.

"Come on, spill it," the lieutenant urged.

"Okay," said Rusty. "It's done with mirrors."

The lieutenant swore. "Cut it out," he grumbled. "What's the real dope?"

"I just told you," said Rusty. "Mirrors. The whole outside of the boat is mirrors. You'll see when you get within five yards. They're all set at funny angles, so no matter how you look at the boat you see only reflections of the water or the sky. The guy who built the boat is below at the controls. He told me he spent five years working out just the right way to set each mirror to make the boat invisible. He got some of the plans for the boat when a friend of his died. This friend, during the Spanish-American war, was goin' to build a boat like this an' sneak into Santiago Harbor and blow up the Spanish fleet for the U. S. navy. The only thing that stopped him doin' it was that the Spanish finally come out anyway and our navy blew 'em up by itself. This guy down below thought he might use the boat to hunt ducks with, only Krantzman—he's dead, I'll tell you about him later—came along and captured the boat the day it was finished."

Peering over the side the lieutenant saw a replica of his own boat, a reflection. He saw his own face looking back at him.

He stared, helplessly.

"Come aboard," invited Rusty. "Here, step right beside me."

The lieutenant stepped gingerly, fully expecting the glass to give way under him.

"I still don't get it," he muttered. "The mirrors, yes. But when your boat and the *Empress* were sunk why didn't we hear this boat's motors or . . ."

"It's run by electric motors," informed Rusty. "And passing through the blockades they were run slowly, so the propeller wouldn't churn the water and . . ."

"But the explosions—" began the lieutenant.

"Torpedoes," explained Rusty.

"It couldn't be," argued the lieutenant. "We'd have seen the trail of bubbles."

"Not from torpedoes run by batteries and electric motors," said Rusty. "Come below. I got some prisoners for you."

MR. GREGORY H. ROWNCLIFFE almost condescended to shake Rusty's hand. "You've done my company a wonderful service," he said. "Without you we might never have learned of that invisible boat. We'll gladly outfit you with another freighter."

He nodded, beaming primly.

The inspector of police came forward. "Nice work, McGuire. I guess you took that long chance," he smiled at Rusty, "because you were sore about your boat being sunk, eh?"

Rusty grinned. "Well, no, maybe I was kind of put out you might say, but I wanted to meet the guy who was better than me."

"And you sure did," laughed the inspector.

"Nope," corrected Rusty, "I've never run against a guy who was better than me, because if I had, I wouldn't be here."

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The High One

By SAMUEL TAYLOR

Author of "The Blind Posses," "Mutual Mistake," etc.

WHILE Tess and Lad were in the room, Bill Dyson was heroically flippant. "I'll be back on the high stage next month," he grinned. "You'll take over, Lad, until then . . ." But when the youngsters had gone through the white door, Dyson gestured Murph close to the bed and whispered, "I'm going out, Murph. . . . No, never mind the blarny. I know it. I'm going out. But I'll hold on, Murph, until after the show. I'll still be here, Murph, waiting to hear all about Lad taking over."

Murph caught the glance from the nurse. "Sure, Bill," he said, fighting his voice to a low pitch. "Sure, Bill, I'll be back right after the act, and tell you all about it."

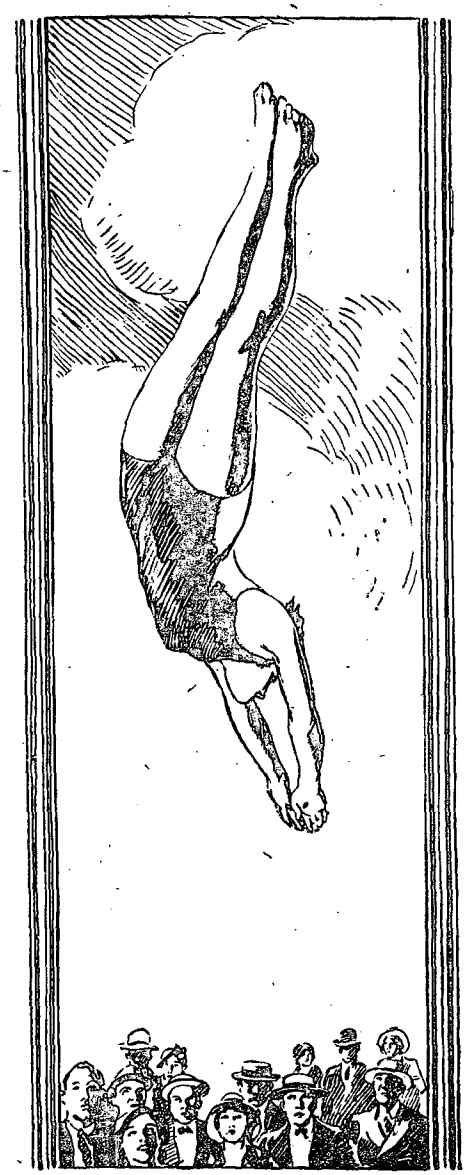
"Lad might be a little nervous, the first time off the high stage. I was, the first time—every time. But Lad—he—"

"He'll be the greatest of the Diving Dysons," Murph lied gallantly. Then he went out, because it was time to start for the pier, and because he couldn't bear the pleading hope that showed on the dying man's face.

The rigging was spotlighted. The spindly steel ladder and the platform could be seen towering above the sprawled concession buildings as the taxi pulled up on Harbor Boulevard as close as a car could come to the Long Beach Pike. Murph was the last one out of the cab. Tess looked back, saw her father straightening gingerly as he fished for the fare.

"Back hurting again, Pop?"

"My back's all right!" snapped Murph. "Let's get changed in a hurry. There'll be a big mob. There's always a mob after—" He clamped his mouth shut as Lad's lips went white. It was only last night that Bill Dyson's lithe body, arching from the high platform, had been caught by a gust of wind and turned off balance. The crowd had sighed—in that horrified, satisfied way that crowds greet tragedy—when Bill Dyson hit the water of the shallow tank, off balance, and unable to give that essen-



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tial flip to keep from ramming the galvanized bottom. The crowd came for thrills. It came to witness danger—or death. It came and it came again—waiting. And last night it got what it was waiting for. Tonight . . . The Pike was jammed. The big pier was a solid, pressing breathing block, standing listening to the band, waiting for the Diving Dysons. Last night there had been an accident. That was very good for business. The Pike officials hired the Diving Dysons to get business, to attract people for the free high-dive, so they'd stay and spend money.

Tess, with her father, followed Lad's wake through the crowd. Her rouge made inverted flaming L's on her white cheeks. Her eyes, a trifle wider than normal, took in the garish signs, the bulb-spotted convulsions of the dipper, the chute tower, the thunderous band on the platform by the shallow tank, and then traveled slowly up the bright nickel of the spidery ladder to the little stages, one at forty feet, for the fire dive, the other at seventy, for the finale. The billing said sixty and a hundred feet; and looking at the frail steel ladder going up into space, few in the crowd would note the exaggeration. But seventy feet is still a long way to come down, even if the eight feet of water in the tank shortens it to sixty-two.

"I'll do the double fire dive with you tonight, Tess," Murph whispered in her ear. "Then Lad will only have to take the high one."

"No you won't. I'll do a solo on the fire dive. You know what the doctor said about your back, Pop."

"I know myself better than any sawbones."

"No!" Tess said. And that was that.

BUT in the dressing room, Murph strapped on the steel-ribbed corset before he climbed into the spangled suit of white jersey. He always wore the corset for the act, even though he hadn't dived for two years. He watched Lad getting ready. The youngster's hands fumbled at his shoelaces. It was tough on Lad, taking the high dive for the first time while his father lay dying in the hospital.

Bill Dyson was up there hanging on, waiting to hear about how Lad came through, and Murph, watching the boy's greenish face and trembling hands, wondered if Lad would come through. A lot of little things had happened to show that Lad wasn't like his father. The boy looked the same—a bit leaner, a shade taller, yet the same—but there was something lacking. He'd been trained since childhood, and yet—well, Lad hadn't gone off the forty-foot stage in the fire dive until he was shamed into it by Tess. Lad had been ready to quit the act when Tess came home from boarding school, but when Lad saw the girl agree to take the fire dive, the boy had just *had* to come through. So they made it a double fire dive, and it was very pretty.

"Ready?" Tess was calling, knocking at the door. The three of them went out on the band platform to be gawked at while the spieler gave the build-up. Murph could see that Lad's color was still bad.

Tess went up the ladder first and when they reached the forty-foot platform Murph daubed her suit with airplane gasoline. The lights went out then and the snare drum began to snarl.

"A single on the fire dive tonight, Lad," Murph said. "You'll have plenty with the high hop. . . . Ready, Tess?"

"Sure, Pop."

"Good luck, kid." He snapped the lighter and her body burst into flame. Tess arched beautifully from the platform, turning slowly, the fire licking down along her legs. The awed sigh of the crowd swelled. There was a sharp hiss as the human torch sliced the water, then that long, long moment of anxiety. Just when the crowd was beginning to murmur the spotlights snapped on and the three Diving Dyson's could be seen grinning and bowing from the platform. It always surprised the crowd how quickly Tess could hop out of the tank and scamper up the ladder in the dark.

Then all the lights were on and the Diving Dysons were on the seventy foot

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platform: *Highest Dive in the World!* Despite its guy wires, the stage always swayed a little, and standing up there you couldn't even see the tank. It was an awfully long trip down. Murph did a handstand, which was always good for a couple of screams by squeamish women. Then Tess did a handstand on the rail and there were more screams. But that was all the stalling. They weren't acrobats, they were the Diving Dysons.

"All right, Lad," said Murph quietly. "There goes the snare. Take a long breath, and don't try anything fancy tonight. Turn slow. Remember it's farther down than you're used to. Turn slow. Take it slow, and keep stiff. Keep stiff, Lad. . . ." Murph just kept talking in a monotone, to keep the boy from thinking. The snare was rolling louder, an urgent snarl in a lonely sea of silence. The arcs glared from below, blinding them, blotting out the crowd and the concessions and everything but the cold dome of the night overhead. But somewhere down below was the shallow tank. You arched off the platform and then fought to keep stiff while a roaring terror tried to melt you. Murph knew all about that. His first dive off the high deck came back to him vividly, a memory that still made his stomach muscles tighten. *That* dive, too, had been when another man lay in the hospital—old Nat Dyson, Lad's grandfather. It was always like that: You stepped in, cold, when somebody was hurt. Promotion was born of tragedy; you advanced over the bodies of those who had dived once too often. That made the first time bad. It was much worse, with Lad, because Bill Dyson was dying. Old Nat Dyson hadn't been hurt so badly when Murph took his place; and Murph had nothing worse than a dislocated spine, when Bill Dyson took *his* place on the high stage. But now Bill Dyson was dying and that made the first dive a horrible thing for his son. And, then, Lad wasn't like his father. There was something lacking. . . . Murph kept up that monotone, and the snare kept rattling that insistent call.

And then Lad sat down. His hand was gripping the nickled bar of the rail, shaking it, shaking his whole body, and he was doing the worst thing he could have done—he was staring down at the white hot eyes of the arcs, far below. He was staring down with his mouth sagging open, the jaw chattering.

Then Tess' voice came flatly from a tight throat. "All right, Dad, I'll take the dive."

Even this didn't affect Lad. Maybe he didn't hear, or maybe only one gigantic emotion—fear—had room inside him, now.

"Help him down," Murph whispered. He took one step to the edge of the platform.

"Pop! You can't—! Your back—"

Murph went off easily, turning very slowly as he fell. The rush of air roared away all other sounds and the speed of his fall blinded his eyes to everything.

MURPH wasn't a Dyson. His first name was Henry, and his last, Murphy. But he had almost forgotten that. He was one of the Diving Dysons and had been one since he ran away from home as a kid. Old Nat Dyson had fed the half-starved kid, had taken him along with the act, just because Nat Dyson's snappish front concealed a kind heart. Nat Dyson had started the high-diving act, first at forty-five feet, then fifty, sixty, sixty-five, and finally seventy. Competition had grown steadily tougher, and the movies, airplanes, high-speed cars and the like had made thrills commonplace. You really *had* to risk your neck, these days.

Bill Dyson was five years younger than Murph. That had made a lot of difference when they were kids; that's why Murph took the high dive instead of Bill, when old Nat quit after getting hurt. It had been time for Nat to quit, anyhow, because his lungs were bad. But the five years between Bill Dyson and Murph seemed less as they grew up. Bill had married first—Lad was three years older than Tess. Many things they had in common, Bill and Murph, outside the act. They were two of a kind, and it showed right down to the color of the ties they wore and the sort of radio programs they liked.

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Also, their kids were in love.

Lad had considered Tess a pesky tomboy, nothing else, before she went away to boarding school. Then Tess' mother died from pneumonia which—next to injury—is a diver's greatest enemy. For you have to put on the act. Cold or warm, sick or well, you have to hit that icy tank at night. Tess came from school to do the fire dive in her mother's place, and Lad discovered that Tess was a very pretty young lady, indeed.

Maybe Murph thought of all this as he went down, and maybe he was conscious of nothing but the speed and the way his back throbbed when he arched it as it had to be arched to make the dive and live. At any rate, the crowd again got what it came for.

Murph stayed in the tank.

TESS rode in the ambulance with her father. She wore her coat over her wet costume, that still smelled of gasoline, and she kept smiling in the tender, brittle way of a woman who is fighting tears.

"Pop, you old fool," she said. "You were wonderful. I never saw such a dive."

Two internes put Murph on a wheeled stretcher in the hospital and headed for the elevator. "Where we goin'?" demanded Murph.

"That's all right. Take it easy," an interne said. Then he told Tess, "Will you please step into the office. A routine paper . . ."

Murph tried to move, and sweat sprang out on his face. "I've got to see Bill! Bill Dyson!" But his legs wouldn't do what he wanted them to. He couldn't feel anything in his legs. They were there, but they wouldn't move. An interne was holding him.

"Tess! Tess! I've got to see Bill Dyson! Bill wants to know! He's hangin' on! He's waitin' to hear—!"

"I'll tell Bill Dyson," Tess said. She couldn't hold the tears out of her eyes any longer, but she held that smile. "Don't try to move, you silly old darling. I'll tell Bill Dyson—about Lad."

"If you—"

"Easy, Pop. I'll tell Bill Dyson what he wants to hear. Sure I will, Pop. He's waiting to hear how Lad took the high dive. I'll tell him, Pop."

Murph smiled with difficulty. "You look a lot like your mother, Tess," he said as they wheeled him into the elevator.

And, a little later, Bill Dyson went out happy in the belief that Lad had come through, that the intrepid Dyson strain had come to the surface in the pinch, that Lad had what it took when the time came to show it.

MURPH'S torso was in a cast. But he was happy. For Tess told him that Lad was taking the high dive. The Diving Dysons were going on. Lad had come through, after all, when it really *did* come to a showdown, Tess said. And that made Murph happy. He had worried, almost as much as Bill Dyson, about Lad. Lad was almost a son, was going to be a son, when he married Tess.

"But why don't he come with you to see me?"

Tess's eyes dropped. "He—well, he feels responsible for you being here. I've told him you didn't blame him. But . . ."

During the summer the act moved east, across the continent. Tess wrote every day. She always mentioned Lad.

One day the cast was cut from Murph's torso. He was fitted with a corset that held a steel rod up his back. "Until you get strong . . ." the doctor said. "And we've got a pair of crutches. Your legs, naturally, will be weak after being in bed."

"I see, Doc. Don't pull the punches. This brace is for good, huh? And what about the sticks? They permanent, too?"

The doctor's eyes gave the answer. "I'm sorry." Then he added, "Possibly, if there was an operation. . . . I don't know. There's only one man in the world who could do it, a doctor in Switzerland. And it would be only a chance, as I told your daughter. Just a chance—"

"You been tellin' Tess that sort of stuff?" roared Murph. "Doc, I'm s'prised at you. I'll be walkin' without sticks by the

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time she gets back in the fall! I'll be divin' inside a year!"

"That's the spirit!" But there was only encouragement in the doctor's voice. There was no hope.

Every day Murph went down to the beach and baked his legs in the sun. He would pull himself along, holding to the breakwater, strengthening his legs.

"That doctor's nuts!" he would tell himself, and then he would curse as he sank down into the warm sand. Tess's daily letters buoyed him up. She was at Lagoon, near Salt Lake, for a week. She and Lad, the Diving Dysons, were carrying on.

But the same day he got the letter, Murph met Lad on the street.

Lad's eyes widened, then the boy wheeled and headed the other way. Murph yelled, "Lad! Lad!" while a great weight bore down on his chest. He kept hollering, trying on his crutches to catch up. A cop saw the chase and collared Lad.

"That's all right, officer. An old friend. He just didn't see me," Murph said. Then he rumbled, "Lad, what you doin' here? Tess wrote me the act was at Lagoon this week."

"All right, what if it is?" Lad muttered defiantly. "I ain't been with the act since—since that night. I've been north, driving a truck. Didn't know if the job would last. But it will, so I'm down to get some stuff I had stored."

"But—Tess said—"

"I don't know anything about Tess!"

Murph took a 'plane. Swinging through the stone gateway at Lagoon that evening, he saw the big canvas streamer tied between two trees:

THE DIVING DYSONS

TESS DYSON, ONLY WOMAN IN THE WORLD TO DO A ONE HUNDRED-FOOT PLUNGE INTO A TANK! ALSO SPECTACULAR FIRE DIVE!

MURPH asked around. Tess had gone to Salt Lake for the day. He was waiting when she returned. She rushed to him, laughing and crying.

"You're awful thin, kid," Murph said.

"I'm all right, Pop. Gee, it's swell to see you!"

"Tess, why didn't you tell me you was doing the high dive?"

"Didn't want to worry you, Pop."

"And those lies about Lad—Tess, am I so old and crippled you have to lie to me?"

Then she was crying again, with her face against his coat, and he was patting her shoulder and feeling how thin it was. "I tried to shame Lad into it," she sobbed. "I thought he'd come through before you got out of the hospital. I thought— Oh, Pop, I can't help being in love with him! I ought to hate him, on account of you, and Bill Dyson. But I can't. He's pust like he was sick, to me—like he ought to be pitied, and worked with."

They were silent a moment and then Murph said finally, "You ain't doing no more dives off that high stage. That ain't for a girl. Maybe you figured you had to have money, when I was laid up. But I'm well, now. You can do the fire dive off the forty-foot stage, but no girl of mine can take the seventy. A woman is too nervous, and she ain't strong enough. I can see what it's done to you. Hire somebody—"

"Tried to. Can't get a man."

"Then we'll close the act."

Tess dashed the tears out of her eyes. "No! The Diving Dysons will keep on. Anyhow, we've got to have money."

"You mean—for me to go to Switzerland? That doctor's a nut. I'm gettin' better. I won't let you take that high-dive, Tess."

Some of the stubbornness of her father showed in her face. "The act is going on!" she said.

"All right," said Murph. "Then I'm part of that act. No woman is goin' to out-dive *me!* If you go off that high platform, Tess, I'm going to follow you!"

The rigging of the Diving Dysons' act went to a storehouse.

THROUGH a friend he'd made during an exhibition there, Murph got a job at the Sutro Baths in San Francisco, issuing suits and towels. He swam a little every

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day in the warm salt-water pool, but his legs still wouldn't navigate without the crutches. Tess got work as an instructor. They didn't speak of Lad any more. Murph found they were in debt for hospital expenses. They paid a little each month. They paid storage on the rigging. There wasn't much left.

Murph thought he'd forgotten high diving, until the day the *Sun* broke the story of a *real* high-dive—a dive from the Bay bridge! According to the paper, somebody was promoting such a dive.

"Just a story," Tess said, when Murph showed her the piece.

"Dunno. Say, that would be a dive! But it'd kill a man, if he didn't make it just right. It's a hundred and eighty-five feet, accordin' to the paper, from the truck level —two-eighteen from the passenger-car road. That's a dive!"

Tess' voice was sharp. "Just a story. The *Sun* and the *Record* are always fighting. The *Sun* is accusing the *Record* of promoting the dive. Next week the *Record* will accuse the *Sun* of something else."

"Dunno. There's always some fool who'll do anything for money. There'd be a pot of cash in that, if it was handled right. But, look, Tess. If we could git hold of a man like that to take the high platform, the Diving Dysons could go again. If we could get hold of him before he breaks his neck on this fool jump. You can't go a hundred and eighty-five feet and come through—unless you're awful lucky. There's always a wind down the Bay. . . ."

"I don't know, Pop. Look at Steve Brodie."

"All right. Did Brodie jump from the Brooklyn Bridge or didn't he? I've heard that both ways. But if you could get hold of this guy before the jump and sign him for the Diving Dysons . . . But that'll be hard. The police will be on guard."

"Just a story, Pop," snapped Tess.

"Don't bite my head off, kid. *I* ain't figuring on that jump."

During the next week, Tess was away from the Baths, trying out a new job uptown. That's what she said she was doing. Murph didn't suspect anything. He was innocent as a babe; he didn't have a single flicker of suspicion until one o'clock on Thursday afternoon.

"What size?" Murph asked when a man appeared before the window. "What size swimmin' suit?"

"Murph, where's Tess?"

The voice stiffened Murph. He looked up slowly into the face of Lad Dyson.

"What do *you* want of Tess?"

"Murph, you can't let her do this!"

"Do what, Lad? What you talkin' about?"

Lad's taut face pulled into an incredulous frown. "You don't know that—why, it's all over town in the pool halls and taverns. A woman is going to make that dive off the bridge!"

Murph's hands groped at the edge of the counter for support. He couldn't speak. He just stood there with eyes wide and mouth slack, staring at Lad.

"I suspected Tess," Lad was saying. "I've been—well, following her around town, in the crowds. Just to look at her. She doesn't know. I've seen her going into a newspaper office—the *Record*. And I've seen other things. I didn't think she'd go through with it. But today it's definite. She's diving off the bridge at three o'clock this afternoon!"

"Switzerland," groaned Murph. "Oh, the little fool! She's doin' it to get money to send me to Switzerland! Lad, can't you find her! Stop her! Lad—"

But Lad had dodged away.

Murph swung out of the suit room on his crutches. He didn't ask to get off, didn't get anybody to take his place. Outside he saw a Liddicoat Bakery truck, number 28. That would be Phil Thompson's wagon. Phil was in delivering hamburger buns. Murph climbed into the cab.

Phil came out, said, "Hello, Murph. Like to give you a lift, but—" He jerked a thumb at the sign on the windshield, *No Riders*.

Murph said, "If you'll take me home, I've got twenty-three dollars there for you

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—if you'll drive me around for a couple hours."

Phil raised blond eyebrows. "Why?"

Murph told him.

Phil hopped into the seat. "Keep your twenty-three bucks, Murph. Where to?"

They went to the little apartment. Tess wasn't there. They went to the *Record*. The managing editor let Murph in, but denied knowing anything about the dive. Murph asked some reporters—and got nothing. He next went to the *Sun*.

"The dive's comin' off at three o'clock. You can stop it!"

The city editor nodded. "Sure; we know. We'll be there. But we won't stop it. We get our pictures free."

"You've got to stop it. It's my girl who's takin' the dive! My daughter!"

The city editor leaned forward over his desk. "Say, if you'll give us exclusive—"

Cursing, Murph went to the police station. They knew, also. "There's a special detail on both levels of the bridge," Murph was told. "Nobody is jumping off today or any other day. The first car that stops gets pinched—stopping on the bridge is illegal. If anybody gets out, he's pinched for being a pedestrian on a vehicle bridge. If anybody tries to jump from a car coming from the San Francisco side, that's trying to evade the toll. We'll stop it."

"Where to, now?" Phil asked.

"Let's cover the pool halls."

By two-thirty, Murph knew all about the jump. The grapevine had spread it. Four jam-packed ferries were churning around below the bridge. Trucks and passenger cars crammed the two levels of the suspension structure, going across, turning around and coming back, paying a toll each way. Three tugs, chartered by newspapers, were like bugs upon the water by the central pier, screws turning just fast enough to overcome the tide wash. Two cutters manned by harbor police were scurrying around with lots of speed and no purpose. A squad of State Police patrolled both levels on motorcycles.

Murph knew everything, except where Tess was.

THE hands of the clock on the Ferry building stretched into a single line. Quarter to three. Then the minute hand slowly began bending upwards.

"She'll take the truck level," Murph muttered to Phil. "It's less distance to jump. If we could stop on the bridge . . ."

No chance," Phil said. "The cops are ramming them through. But, heck—these tires don't cost the company much!" Phil took his pocket knife and carefully sliced a four-inch L on the sidewall of the right front tire, nicking through three, four, then five plies of the six-ply cords. Inner pressure made the cut gap open.

"All right, Murph. I might sleep in the jug tonight, but we'll stop on the bridge."

There was delay on the approach. Cars were fighting for a place on the bridge. When the truck rolled onto the first span, it was eight minutes to three.

"Long bridge," muttered Murph. "Dunno which spot. . . . But the newspaper tugs are by the central pier."

"Okay, Murph. Then that's where we'll be." Phil took the outside lane. Where the big cable swooped down to the coupling, Phil cramped his wheels sharply. "Hold on, Murph!"

The tire roared open. Murph gingerly got up from the floor.

"Get along, there! Pull that can away! No stopping here!" Two state policemen on white motor-bikes drew alongside.

Phil grinned. "Do *we* look like high divers? I'll lose my job if I ruin that casing by running on it flat."

"All right, change it. But step on it!"

Phil acted as if he were working fast. But he had trouble with the bolts, trouble with the jack. Murph leaned on his crutches, watching the lanes of moving trucks. It was three o'clock. It was time. The wind was screaming through the cables. It was past time. Maybe—maybe it was a false alarm. Tess was a sensible girl. She wouldn't do this fool trick.

A siren! Murph's heart seemed to squeeze up inside his chest. Fifty yards back, a truck had stopped, a man was out, darting through the traffic for the oppo-

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site side of the roadway. Another siren wailed, another. Murph tried to hobble that way. Couldn't cross for the vehicles. He cursed his crutches. Traffic was tangling. The running man reached the opposite side and climbed up on the guard rail. A state policeman pulled him down.

Then Murph saw the real play. The man was a decoy. He hadn't intended to jump at all. From the front seat of his stopped truck a figure in a blue dress and hat had jumped—from the running board to the rail—a woman! And Murph was near her, because, with his crutches, he hadn't been able to run across through the traffic.

"Tess!" Murph lurched desperately for the figure in the blue dress. "Tess! Tess!"

Then he knew it wasn't Tess, even before the head turned and under the hat he saw the fear-frozen face of Lad.

Murph clutched the blue dress, grabbed the legs and pulled Lad from the rail. They were shielded from view by the truck body, unnoticed because of the decoy across the roadway.

"Let me go, Murph! Let me go!"

"Where's Tess? What you doin', Lad?"

"I stopped her, I think," Lad said. He was panting. "I found the truck she was to come in and rammed a hole in the gas tank. But that won't stop her long. The *Record's* behind her. She'll be coming in another truck. She might be in any of them. I've got to go off, or she will. If I go, she won't. It's the first one off the bridge that gets the money."

"Money, is it?"

"Don't be a fool! I can't let Tess do this for you. It's my fault you've got those sticks under your arms, and I'll raise the dough to take 'em away."

"You will, huh? Think I'd take it."

"Murph, I can't argue—"

"Neither can I." Murph let go one crutch, using the other as a pivot. He still had all the old-time strength in his shoulders. His fist exploded on Lad's jaw.

And then Murph was pulling his dangling legs up the guard rail, dragging himself by his arms. Phil was yelling, running that way. A cop bawled.

Murph slipped off easily, turning very, very slowly, for it was a long way to the blue-steel water. So he'd never dive again, huh?

MURPH didn't remember hitting the water. When he came to a siren was screaming, and he was rocking back and forth in a little room. It was an ambulance. Tess and Lad were there. Lad's hair and clothes were wet. He still had on the blue dress.

"You—Lad—?"

"The fool boats didn't see where you came up. I couldn't let you drown. But I didn't dive. I just jumped," Lad paused and then said reverently, "Murph, that was the greatest dive I ever saw!"

"You—jumped off?" Murph muttered. It seemed a long time before that soaked in. Lad's arm was around Tess's shoulders, and she was clinging to him while she looked at Murph. She was trying to smile, but the tears kept welling out of her eyes.

"Dad—why . . .?"

"Use the dough for a weddin' present," Murph said. And he raised a slow, clumsy finger to wipe a tear from her cheek.

"And to get the riggin' out of storage—the ladder and tank cables for the act," said Lad. "I guess I've gone through too much these last few months to keep on. It's worse, feeling you're a rat, than doing something to make you keep from feeling that way. And seventy feet won't be nothing, after today."

"The Diving Dysons!" breathed Murph. "Tess doin' a fire dive off the forty—an' Lad goin' off the high stage! The Diving Dysons! An' maybe, sometime, other Dysons growin' up into it. . . . Won't Bill be glad to hear this! Old Bill Dyson. I never *did* get a chance to tell Bill about Lad. Old Bill Dyson, waitin' to hear about Lad. How Lad came through on the high platform. Bill, old pal, wait'll I tell you. Wait'll I tell you about the Diving Dysons. . . ."

Bill Dyson didn't have long to wait.

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Fourth Classman

By PAUL R. MORRISON

Time: Mid-July
Place: West Point.
Weather: Hot.

CADET CROSS COSTIGAN'S face dripped with perspiration. As a Fourth Classman—the lowest ranking class at the United States Military Academy, he was paying the penalty for his latest transgression. An eagle-eyed yearling had spied him slouching at the dinner table. Dinner at West Point, you know, is at noon, and about this time in mid-July the sun is sucking the last molecule of moisture from the Plain.

"Mister Dumbguard," the yearling, Third Classman Mambus, was instructing him with great patience, "pull your backbone up out of your trou! Bend forward at the waist! Now, hold it while you heave out on your chest!"

"And get your chin back inside your collar!" First Classman Reynolds, cadet lieutenant of B Company, glanced up from his plate long enough to observe, "If there's anything I hate to see more than anything else, it's a plebe with a chin. Mister Ducrot, did you hear me? I said get your chin *back inside your collar!*"

Fourth Classman Milton Wakefield, who sat beside Costigan, could hear Costigan, his roommate, breathing hard. For the last two minutes, every upper classman at the table had been taking turns working over Cadet Costigan. Wakefield sat a little straighter, kept his own chin well pulled in, and maintained the exact number of prescribed inches between his stomach and the table. He squirmed a little farther out on the edge of his chair—better be too far away from its back than not far enough. No plebe at West Point had ever yet felt the back of a chair.

"I said," Yearling Mambus continued, "for you to heave out on that chest! More yet, Mister Duflicket! Do you hear?"

"Yes, I . . ."

"Say, *sir!*" Yearling Mambus roared.

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"Say, *sir!*" a half-dozen upper classmen around the table cracked out in the same breath.

"*Sir!*" snapped Plebe Costigan.

"Now say it with pathos," murmured Reynolds. "I've been here over three years, but never have I heard such a disrespectful tone. Never." He shook his head sadly.

"*S-i-r-r!*" Plebe Costigan ground out.

"Louder!" Yearling Mambus shouted.

"*S-i-r-r-r-r-r!!*"

"That's better," affirmed Yearling Mambus, and banged his water glass on the table.

"Glass, please!" barked Plebe Wakefield promptly, and looked up just in time to catch the glass thrown by Cadet Mambus from the other end of the table. And just as promptly he filled it with water, being careful not to allow the lip of the pitcher to touch the rim of the glass.

That was orders. Cadet Wakefield was getting used to taking orders. He had an idea that getting used to taking them was about ninety-nine and ninety-nine one-hundredths of West Point. He could see that obeying promptly made things go easier for a plebe and, further, reason told him that being trained to obey instantly minor, seemingly unimportant, orders, would educate one's brain to execute an order with machine precision in a battle emergency.

He passed the glass back to the yearling, and immediately lowered his eyes to look only upon his plate. That, too, was prescribed, a sort of supreme modesty. No plebe was ever allowed to peer beyond the focal point of his dinner equipment.

"Go ahead now and finish your dinner, Mister Costigan," Mambus ordered.

"Yes, sir!"

WAKEFIELD, though his duties as water corporal had kept him busy serving the table, suddenly found himself finished with the most excellent meal—a characteristic of West Point—and placed both hands in his lap. He kept his eyes screwed upon the center of his plate. He could still hear his roommate's heavy breathing and, squinting from the corner of his eye, he noticed that Costigan's nearest hand, the fork hand, was trembling so that his food dropped off the tines. And Wakefield knew that Costigan was not trembling from fear. He was trembling from anger—anger so long accumulated that Wakefield instantly expected an explosion. And that would mean dismissal from the academy.

But Costigan finally finished, or rather disregarded, his food. He put his hands in his lap—a signal the upper classmen were waiting for.

"You're sure you're through, Mister Costigan?" Yearling Mambus asked, and Plebe Wakefield knew from his tone that he was grinning.

"Yes, sir!" Costigan said shortly.

"Where are you from, Mister Costigan?"

"New Jersey, sir!"

"Where!" roared Mambus.

"New Joisey, sir!"

"Have you memorized your little piece as I instructed you?"

"Yes, sir! I have, sir!"

"Cut out the unnecessary language!"

"Yes, sir!"

Silence. Wakefield knew what was coming next; he had listened to Costigan's angry rehearsals for two days now. Grimly, Wakefield clamped his jaws together. If he laughed, even so much as smiled, he'd get a most efficient crawling.

"Well?" queried Mambus.

"Do you know, Mister Dumbguard," growled First Classman Reynolds, "that first classmen are not in the habit of having to wait for Plebes?"

"Yes, sir! I mean no, sir!"

"Just what do you mean, Mister Ducrot?"

"Sir, I mean, sir, that, sir—no, sir!"

"Say *sir* with fervor!"

"*Sir!!!*"

"Ah!" breathed Yearling Mambus. "Let us begin."

"I'm from New Joisey, Sir." Costigan bowed his head meekly and held his hands, palms together, before him in a prayerful attitude. "A little boid sat on a tree and choiped and choiped and choiped. I go

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to choich on Soinday, and weah a doity, poiple shoit."

"Sir!" roared Yearling Mambus.

"Sir!" roared every upper classman at the table.

"S-s-sir!" Mister Costigan ground out between clamped teeth.

"Well, Mister Wakefield," asked Mambus, "what're *you* grinning at?"

"No excuse, sir!"

"Well, wipe that smile off your puss!"

PLEBE WAKEFIELD took his napkin and carefully and solemnly wiped his face, and when the napkin moved away and lips appeared once more there was not the slightest trace of a smile, though sharp-eyed upper classmen examined him for several seconds in minute detail.

"All right, now, pull in your chin!" Mambus started bracing him. "Get the sway out of your back and heave out on that chest! Now, break forward at the waist! Suck in on that stomach, heave down on your shoulders and pull 'em back till your shoulder-blades meet! All right, now, hold that!"

Sweat popped out on Wakefield's face, streamed into his eyes and down his cheeks. He could feel little rivulets trickling along his spine. A drop fell off his nose.

"Now," observed First Classman Reynolds, "compare the two pusses. This Mister Ducrot from New Jersey has resentment written all over his face; this Mister Ducrot from Montana does what you tell him—when and well."

"But Mister Reynolds, give us time!" exclaimed Yearling Mambus, himself but a month removed from plebehood. "We've only just begun to work on this Mister Ducrot from New Joisey."

"Now," Reynolds began, "when I was a plebe . . ."

"Yeah," drawled Mambus, "when you were a plebe! Seems like I remember when I was a plebe and you walked front rank of the squad behind me. My backbone still aches."

"You needed it! You were the most blasé plebe I ever saw."

"Yeah, and I've heard your pred' say things about you that . . ."

"Ba-tah-yun! 'Ten-shun!"

The stentorian voice of Cadet Captain MacMorrow, regimental adjutant, bellowed the battalion to attention, and within three minutes Cadet Wakefield found himself marching back toward summer encampment. On his left, his roommate was again in trouble.

"Mister Costigan, pull down on that left shoulder! It's not square with the other!"

"Yes, sir!" Costigan blew through the sweat that dripped off his nose upon his lips.

"No talking in ranks, there!" warned Cadet Lieutenant Summers, double-timing abreast. He started to drop back, but catching sight of Costigan added, "Mister Ducrot—you second man in the rear rank—get that stomach in out of the weather! Heave in! You're a disgrace to the Corps!"

"Yes, sir!" replied Cadet Costigan.

Lieutenant Summers dropped back.

"Mister Ducrot," blazed Yearling Mambus in a hoarse whisper, "never again let it be necessary for a cadet officer to discipline you! That's an insult to my ability! I'm the man who walks behind you, and I'm the man who'll be responsible if the Commander-in-Chief of the Army saw you slopped all over the Plain! Now get busy!"

"Yes, sir!"

Wakefield had by this time learned to see a full ninety degrees in either direction, left or right, without so much as twisting his head the slightest, and now he watched the heaving, straining, resentful Cadet Cross Costigan. He wanted to feel sorry for Costigan, but try as he might he couldn't; Costigan had brought it on himself. His entire attitude was wrong. He could not see beyond this year of discipline. He could not look forward down these long lines of gray into the future, into the smoke of some distant battlefield where a single order given quietly, tersely, and obeyed implicitly, might save the lives of thousands; or, if disobeyed, no matter how slightly, might lose those lives.

Nor could Costigan, thought Wakefield,

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heaving out his chest and squaring his shoulders, see back down these long lines of gray, into the past, where rode Sherman and Grant and Lee and Pershing. Where—But Plebe Wakefield's eyes grew wide and moist, and he felt a choking sensation in his throat. Through his brain ran a bit of *The Corps,* West Point's beloved song:

Grip hands—though it be from the shadows,
While we swear, as you did of yore,
Or living or dying to honor
The Corps, and the Corps, and the Corps!

HIS company—Company B—ground into its own camp street. "Squads right! Company!" bellowed Cadet Captain Reynolds, and the *sluff-sluff, shuff-shuff,* of many feet marking time rubbed sleepily on July-warmed senses.

"Halt!"

In measured one-two, B Company came to rigid, silent attention.

"Dismissed!"

Wakefield headed for his tent at a dead run. This, too, was West Point tradition. No plebe walked in camp, whether he was going to or from a formation, or round-tripping to the latrines down at that end of the encampment that overlooked the Hudson. He ran. And when Mister Wakefield, or any Mister Ducrot, ran, they *ran!*

He had already gotten to the sanctity of his tent and had changed to hiking uniform before he grew conscious of three upper classmen down the street who were unmercifully bracing Costigan.

"Run!" one of them barked.

"Halt!" snapped another.

"Run!"

"Halt!"

"Pull in your chin, Mister Dumbguard! Get your chest out and your hands back beyond the seam of your trousers! Mister Ducrot, do I have to tell you to get the sway out of your back!"

"For the love of the Lady on the Monument, Mister Ducrot," growled another, "suck in that belly so I can get by!"

Wakefield sat down on his locker and began to clean his rifle, searching inside the barrel for the least sign of powder or rust, and polishing the outside until not even a crevice or a screw-head failed to shine. He had just put the rifle away and was getting his tar-bucket—cadet's parade hat—to polish the fried egg thereon when Costigan rushed down the company street and dashed into the tent. He flopped on his locker, and the sweat streamed off his chin onto the floor.

Wakefield waited. It wouldn't be long in coming. It never was.

"What a hole!"

Wakefield's shoulders went back. He kept on polishing the brass insignia on his tar-bucket. "If you'd quit fighting it," he said, "you'd . . ."

"I said what a hole!" shrieked Cadet Costigan.

Wakefield got up and put away his hat and cleaning materials. "They said we could have the afternoon off. Let's go for a hike over toward Crow Nest."

"That's just it!" Costigan ripped out. "*They* said this and *they* said that! And always being *permitted* to do things around here!"

Wakefield adjusted his black net tie around the collar of his gray shirt, and one at a time kicked out his feet to examine his leggins and drill trouser lacing. He took a squint at his shoes and, finally satisfied that everything was spoony—neat—he turned toward the tent flaps.

"All right!" growled Costigan. "Wait I'll go!"

HE kept on muttering while he got out of his all-white uniform, which had been the order for dinner, and climbed into his own hiking outfit. He scowled as he adjusted his O. D. hat with the West Point black and gold hatband.

"You look positively handsome, Costigan," observed Wakefield with a broad grin. "You'd make a good cowpoke for Dad's dude ranch out home."

"Don't be funny!"

While Costigan finished folding his clothing away, Wakefield leaned against the tent pole and watched the barren top of

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Crow Nest, a mountain to the northwest of that point of land that juts eastward out into the Hudson River—West Point. On Crow Nest one might see the terrific ravages of exploded shells, and pick up bits of metal shell casings and shrapnel. Rocky, treeless, the mountain top made an excellent target for the West Point artillery batteries.

As Wakefield looked, a thin rainbow of white smoke streaked up from behind the westward hills and plunged, cometlike, down upon Crow Nest. There was a puff of smoke just before the rainbow was completed—bursting shrapnel. Another! A little higher, farther beyond. A third—almost directly in the center of the two previous bursts. The explosions reached his ears—dull *ploffs*—innocent sounding, but blasting a deadly cone of slugs upon the ground beneath, leveling anyone who might be there.

But no one would be beneath. Cadets stood guard to all entrances and here and there regularly enlisted men warned persons from the danger zone. An upper classman strolled down the street, and Wakefield ducked back inside. He had been braced only yesterday for letting his eyes stray to view those bursting shells. He had been supposed to be busily engaged in cleaning his equipment, but had risked a few glances at the cannonade and became so absorbed in the display that he did not come to wakefulness until his pred' happened by—predecessor from the same district in Montana.

The present upper classman passed on up the street, disappeared into a plebe's tent, evidently on the prowl for some fourth classman who had not, in his eyes, lived up to West Point tradition.

"Let's go!" Wakefield said.

Growling, Costigan followed. They ran side by side down the company street and swung into the battalion street. An upper Classman stuck his head out of a nearby tent and shouted, "Run!"

They ran until they came to the guard line. "All right for you, sir?" the guard, a plebe on duty, sang out.

"All right for me, sir!" came Wakefield's ready response.

"What do you think?" Costigan snapped.

"All right for you, sir?" the plebe guard challenged again, following his instructions.

Before Costigan could frame another reply, the Officer in Charge, a regular army captain, strode out from A Company street.

"What did you say, Mister Ducrot?"

"I—that is, sir . . ."

"Repeat what you said!"

"I said, 'What do you think?' sir!"

At this moment Cadet Lieutenant Reynolds happened to turn into B Company street and the army captain called to him, "Mister Reynolds, come here!"

"Yes, sir!" Reynolds called, coming up quickly.

"Report this man," the captain snapped, "for gross disobedience of orders!"

"Yes, sir!"

THE captain saluted, spun around and walked back the way he had come, in the direction of officers' row. Cadet Lieutenant Reynolds clicked his heels together and turned out his practiced, perfect salute, the salute that only a genuine West Pointer can give. When the officer had gone, Reynolds swung on Costigan.

"You, Mister Dumbguard! You're not fitting in around here! Why don't you get next to yourself? I'd crawl you till sundown if I thought you were worth it!"

He, too, spun, and walked toward his tent, where he would record the charge of "gross disobedience to orders," a charge which would come out on the gig list on the bulletin board in the morning and which would put Costigan definitely over the limit of demerits allowed without walking an hour on the area for every demerit above the limit.

Wakefield crossed the boundary line this time unchallenged, thinking of the blistering sun of the area and the fierce walking back and forth at attention with gun and white gloves. He had so far escaped the area, but if he were ever over the demerit limit he wouldn't mind the area grind half

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so much as those white gloves. They certainly left no doubt for anybody who passed by as to just what duty a fellow was performing in that endless march back and forth, back and forth, hour after hour, while others went on hikes, or swam, or rode horseback, or just plain loafed on the red comforters in the divs, free from discipline.

"All right for you, sir?"

It was the guard's challenge again.

Costigan growled, "All right for me, sir!" and crossed the boundary. In a few seconds he strode angrily up beside Wakefield. They walked across the Plain, passed by Battle Monument on Trophy Point, and swung on down the hill.

"Mind if we walk over to limits?" Wakefield asked. "Like to get a better close-up of those shells. Some day we might want to know how a bursting shell acts."

Costigan said nothing, but Wakefield, glancing at his face, saw that his cheeks were flaming red and that his jaws were so strongly set that his lips were formless and livid white. Anger like that, thought Wakefield, was self-consuming. Nobody could resent discipline with that fury and still not be horribly affected, both mentally and physically. Wakefield said nothing more. There was a great deal he wanted to say; he wanted to tell Costigan of what he had been thinking when they marched to quarters; he wanted to tell him what he had seen down those lines of young men in gray.

After a time, skirting around the rifle range to the west, they came to thicker woods, and headed along a sharp, ascending trail. Gradually Costigan began to pull ahead. He was a strong, athletic fellow, and Wakefield had a hard time keeping up. Really, thought Wakefield, his roommate was just being plain jackass. If he would only—but there Wakefield's thoughts stopped. He had tried to reason with Costigan, tried to laugh off his discomfiture, tried being angry with him—all useless. He watched the broad shoulders that had already proven Costigan's ability as a boxer and swimmer, and promised a powerful man in the making. But . . . Cadet Wakefield couldn't reason any further.

They stepped from the trail to let two batteries of guns and caissons roll by, each unit accompanied by its tired upper classmen in from field artillery practice. Evidently it had been they who were blazing away at Crow Nest.

"Might as well go back," Wakefield suggested. "They're through. We got here too late."

"I'm going on a piece," Costigan muttered. "Think I'll climb on up to the top of the mountain."

"You mean Crow Nest?"

"Why not? They're through for today. Let's see where they've been shooting. You may learn something."

"All right," Wakefield agreed, and they strode along the up-trail.

Coming to a foot path a few minutes later, they left the main trail and headed up a steeper, shorter path. They had gone only a few yards when an enlisted man rushed from the trees behind them. He was waving his arms at them.

"Off limits today!" he shouted. "Come back!"

Wakefield turned promptly and had gone down trail several paces before he noticed that Costigan had not even swung around. Wakefield paused.

He called, "Come on, Costigan. Where you going?"

"I'm going on," Costigan mumbled. "Why don't they bring their orders up-to-date? Those field pieces went home a quarter of an hour ago."

HE walked rapidly around a bend in the trail and disappeared. Wakefield glanced back at the enlisted man who had now come up to him. The soldier said, "That's orders."

"Of course."

"Well," said the soldier, "I've done all the captain asked me to do—warn everybody out of here. Don't suppose there is any danger now—seeing as how the boys have gone home with the guns. But it's still orders."

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He shrugged his shoulders and strode on down to the road. Wakefield, following, glanced back. He had a strange feeling that he should have gone with his roommate and tried to bring him along, persuade him not to go off limits.

When he and the soldier arrived at the main road, a detail of upper classmen was just marching by. They were being led by Cadet Lieutenant Reynolds, and Yearling Mambus was among them. They were marching at route step and talking like a troop of chattering monkeys.

"Pull in your chin!" one of them sang out, and Wakefield complied.

"Where's that blasé roommate of yours?" Yearling Mambus asked.

"Gone up to Crow Nest."

"What?" Cadet Lieutenant Reynolds snapped. "Detail, halt!"

"Crow Nest?" Mambus asked, his voice pitched high. "How long ago?"

"Only a few minutes, sir!"

"Few minutes too many!" Reynolds glanced at his wrist watch. "Didn't he know there's a third battery going into action at two o'clock!"

"That battery will blow him to bits!" exclaimed Mambus. "With your permission, sir, I'll go after him!"

"You'd never have time! Less than five minutes to go—it's more than that to the top from here. He'll just about get up there when the first shell pops! He won't have a chance!"

"I'm going!" Mambus cried. "He's my special plebe. Why, that fool will—I mean, sir, with your permission! I know a short cut—found it last Sunday!"

Wakefield whirled and ran up the woodland path. He heard Mambus pound along behind him. Near the spot where Costigan had vanished, he glanced back. Mambus was within six yards of him, coming fast. Wakefield rushed on, alert to spot the short cut trail that Mambus had mentioned knowing about.

A bend in the trail. Another. He looked at his watch. Three minutes until two! He pounded on. No short-cut trail appeared; and he realized, then, that he had passed it. A glance over his shoulder confirmed the thought—Mambus was nowhere in sight.

Wakefield had been on Crow Nest only once before, and he couldn't remember how near to the timber line he was now, but three minutes more should take him out in the clear. He could then shout to Costigan, inform him of his danger. Another bend in the trail. He twisted his head about as he ran and had a glimpse of Mambus, already high above him, lunging along the trail that cut sharply away through the timber where light filtered through the woods.

Wakefield plunged on. Again he glanced at his watch. A minute and a half till two o'clock. He breathed a deep gulp of air, shouted, "Costigan! Stop! Costigan! Artillery fire!"

BUT Wakefield's voice seemed little more than a loud wheeze. He glanced toward Mambus. Trees and brush had swallowed him. Wakefield's leggins rasped against each other at the calf of his legs. He tripped, stumbled, kept on. Costigan's fault, disobedience to an order—still—roommate—a cadet—a human life. He tried again to cry out warning, but he could command only a whisper.

Light was ahead and the last few trees. His watch showed twenty seconds until two o'clock! The watch wasn't fast either; it kept accurate time.

The trees grew thinner and a running form glimmered past the trunks in the farther distance — Mambus. Mambus stopped, cupped his hands over his mouth, shouted. Wakefield thumped out into the open a hundred yards behind him. He didn't dare look at his watch. He knew the zero hour was but a few seconds away.

He had just one glimpse of Costigan, sitting glumly with his back to a boulder, paying no attention to Mambus' shout. But then Mambus shouted again: "Get out of there, fool! Battery's going to fire at two o'clock! It's that now!"

It was.

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Costigan had barely gotten to his feet when the whine of a shell from a field gun droned in their ears. The whine rose in wailing, terrifying crescendo—a sound none of them had ever heard before.

"Down!" shouted Mambus, throwing himself flat on his face.

But Costigan had no time for that; the shell exploded behind him—to his right—so close that its cone of shrapnel kicked dust in hundreds of places all around him. Costigan spun about, his knees crumpling. He had been struck.

Wakefield hurried forward, but a madly flying figure preceded him—Mambus. Mambus crouched as he ran.

Another shell whined up out of the valley, exploded, this time a slight distance farther away, although the flying fragments and shrapnel splintered the rocks within a few yards of Mambus and the fallen Costigan. Wakefield plunged on.

"I'm coming!" he heard Mambus shout to Costigan.

Another shell exploded.

The ground seemed to come up to meet Wakefield. He was on his knees, palms on the rocks. He staggered to his feet, saw Mambus lean over Costigan and pick him up in both arms. Mambus wobbled under the load, zigzagged crazily. Wakefield stumbled forward to help him, but then it appeared that the hillside went skyward in blazing smoke.

And that was the last he knew until his senses made out that someone was moaning nearby. He rolled over on his stomach, got on his knees, squirmed along that way. Mambus was moaning weakly, a sodden blood patch staining his mangled gray shirt. Costigan lay beneath him, showing no signs of life. Wakefield crawled on—grew faint—continued. At last he had an arm of each, and began crawling away. A shell struck directly ahead and tore a hole in the rocks, blasting fragments into a huge splintery fountain of fire.

He fought to rise, but his foot crumpled. Vaguely he understood that a shell fragment had injured it. He kept on crawling, worming along. The world grew black, but he crawled on through the darkness. A pin point of light showed at the other end of a monstrous black tunnel. He opened his eyes wider, to see, and stared for a moment without comprehension at the ceiling, then turned to see that he was in a white hospital bed.

"Well, Mister Ducrot!" grinned Yearling Mambus from the other bed.

"Yes, sir!" responded Cadet Wakefield in a small, weak voice.

A door opened, a doctor came in and examined him, glanced at Yearling Mambus and went out.

But the door opened again, and Cadet Costigan, a bandage around his head, stood there.

"I'm terribly sorry, Wakefield," he said. "And I want to thank you, Mister Mambus, for saving my . . ."

"Say *sir*, Mister Dumbguard!"

"*Sir!*"

"Now pull in your chin and heave out on that chest! I never saw such a blasé plebe in my life! Suck in that ponderous belly and get the sway out of your back! Down on your shoulders! More yet, Mister Dumbguard! Hold those hands beyond the seam of your trousers!"

Wakefield glanced wearily at Costigan's face, started to turn so as not to have to see, but—his eyes grew wide and round—Costigan was trying hard not to smile! There was an indefinable something on his face that changed him completely from the growling, griping roommate of these last hard weeks. And what was more Costigan was doing a genuine West Point brace.

"All right, Mister Ducrot!" Mambus snapped. "Run!"

Costigan ran, and that run was a genuine plebe gallop. Wakefield smiled.

"And you, Mister Ducrot!" Mambus, the yearling, spat out. "What's so funny to you! Wipe that smile off your puss!"

Solemnly, Plebe Wakefield, using the corner of his sheet, wiped his mouth. As his lips appearred again, not the slightest trace of a smile could be detected.

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Lee staggered and lurched over the flooded deck

The Big Wind Blows

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

THE day that the president of the Miami Fifth National Bank summoned his clerk to his office to tell him that he was going to be given a chance to prove his ability marked the beginning of an almost complete disarrangement of the clerk's mode of life. From that moment on nothing but violent and unpleasant things happened to Marvin Lee. And instead of cringing under the lashing of a destiny that seemed determined to obliterate him completely, Marvin rose up in his might and smacked it right back.

Marvin was to go and check up on the progress being made by a construction project on one of the remoter Florida-archipelago islands, and discover if he could whether or not the bank should grant an extension of its loan.

That sounded mild enough as far as it went—but it didn't go very far. The construction superintendent—a surly giant with mismated eyes—took a dislike to Marvin on sight, and assigned him to the hardest jobs that could be found. Within Lee's first hour on the sandy, wind-parched island, that superintendent, Scoop Sloper by name, had killed one of the workmen in a knife fight, and had threatened to do the same for "any other wise guy who thinks he knows too much."

THERE is mystery on the island, too. The mystery behind the odd actions of the timekeeper, Hamilton. The mystery of why Hamilton's pretty daughter lets Sloper paw her and say he is going to marry her. The mystery of the visits of a motorboat owned by a man named Abrams, who stops at the island almost every day. The mystery of what Abrams and Sloper and his cronies are up to. And finally the terrifying mystery of who stabbed the timekeeper, Hamilton, when Marvin Lee was in the throes of his first, unsuccessful, bout with too much to drink—and who put the bloody knife used in the killing under Marvin Lee's pillow.

Someone is trying to frame him. Why?

This serial began in the Argosy for June 19

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Someone thinks he knows too much. But this is puzzling, too, because Marvin doesn't really know anything about what is going on. But in sheer self-defense, Marvin Lee is becoming something very like a tough guy. Red Malloy, the only man on the island that Marvin can look to for help and friendship, has taken to calling him "Buck." Linda Hamilton, on the other hand, calls him, "spy" and "murderer."

MARVIN is formally accused, by Sloper, of Hamilton's murder, and is locked up to wait for the sheriff. And then the hurricane that has been blowing up out of the Caribbean strikes the island with overwhelming fury. In the chaos, Marvin makes his escape and hides on Linda's houseboat. The laborers frantically try to board Abrams' launch, which is their only means of escape from the island. The launch capsizes and at least twenty of the men are drowned. But Scoop Sloper wasn't drowned. And neither was Red Malloy.

Red, in fact, fights his way through the storm to the houseboat. Somebody shoots at them through the window with a machine-gun—and Red is wounded. Marvin discovers the machine-gunner is Swaybell, one of Sloper's men, and, berserk with anger, lets him drown when a mountainous wave sweeps him from his gun nest. Then Marvin goes back to the half-flooded houseboat to attend to Red Malloy's wounds.

He is just about finished with his improvised job of surgery when Linda, who has been staring out of the window at the black and howling water, turns to him and announces in a calm, terrible voice:

"The hawser holding us to the bulkhead has parted. We—we're adrift."

CHAPTER XIII

HURRICANE

PRESSING his face hard against the pane, Marvin Lee could see, through a down-running sheet of water, a smoking turmoil of waves and spray and rain blowing horizontally with the wind. Something more he could see, and it became plainer with each foot the houseboat drifted: the lights from the crews' barge.

"Get out on deck, quick!" he yelled at Linda. "We're drifting down on the big barge! Go on! Maybe you can jump aboard if we hit! Don't stand there!"

"I'm waiting for you," Linda said, simply.

"I'm going to ride it out in this."

"All right," Linda retorted. "So am I."

Lee used some language on her, cursed her vividly, but she did not budge. Helplessly Marvin glanced at Red's inert figure on the berth. He'd never seen such an obstinate girl. He couldn't leave Red here, to drift off into Florida Bay, perhaps into the Gulf of Mexico, with nobody to help him if he came to. Only a couple of hours before, Red had thrust his gloomy face through the window aboard the crews' barge and stopped Scoop and Cash and the rest from kicking Marvin to death. How, then, could Marvin leave him now?

Marvin Lee sighed. Then he strode to the berth and swung Red's limp body to his shoulder.

"All right!" he said wearily. "Go on! Can't you even jump from one scow to another by yourself?"

"No," Linda said. "Are you coming?"

Indian file, they careened down the corridor and into the living room. Lee realized that the houseboat was slowly sinking; for some moments he had been standing in ankle-deep water, too excited to notice. Here, in the living room, water was coming up through the floorboards, seeping in under the door, spouting in from two or three tiny holes he hadn't seen. Bullet holes, those were. Marvin was glad he had let Swaybell go swimming off to any place he could reach.

"Hurry!" Linda cried. "We're going to bump into the barge!"

"What are you kicking about?" Lee demanded. "If we don't bump it, we'll have to swim, won't we?"

It was hard even to stand, let alone walk, with Red's weight dangling over his shoulder. Marvin staggered and bumped himself and Red into the partitions. Perhaps, he thought, he was drunk. He felt giddy and light-headed, and dazed by all the things that had happened—that were happening.

The houseboat was careening and yawing wildly under the pulsing throb of the

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gale. It was sliding across the waves with increasing speed. The lights of the big crew's barge, at first fogged by the rain and flying drift, were now coming into sharp focus.

"Get out on deck!" he shouted at Linda. "Jump when we hit. If we don't hit, we're through. We can't stay afloat another half hour."

She shot a quick glance at him, then silently fought her way to the door. She had to hang on with both hands as she twisted the knob and let the wind slam the door open. The wind shrieked into the living room and almost blew Marvin over, top-heavy and ill balanced as he was with Red's body on his shoulder. He staggered and climbed the sloping floor to the door.

"We're going to miss it!" Linda screamed.

But he didn't have breath enough to answer her. Besides, there was nothing to say. If they missed it, they missed it, and that was all there was to it. They would go chasing off into the outer blackness after the overturned cruiser, after the men who were floating around out there, and it wouldn't be long before they would be floating around, too.

THE brightly lighted sides of the barge mushroomed, towered over the cockleshell of a scow. Through the broken window Lee could see nobody on those narrow decks. The shuttered windows in the big deckhouse gazed blindly, uncaringly, at the tiny houseboat that was drifting downwind. It was not until the houseboat sagged into the trough of a sea and Lee glimpsed barnacles on the copper-painted bottom of the crews' barge that he realized she, too, was laboring badly in the storm.

"Get out there!" he squalled. "And jump!"

He took one hand from around Red's dangling legs, placed it in the small of Linda's back and pushed her violently toward the door. She pulled herself out into the screaming fury of the wind and rain. And he grabbed the door jamb and hauled himself after her. It was worse than he had imagined out there. The retaining wall of the island was still offering some slight shelter from the seas. At least it was tripping them, breaking them, before they swept over the houseboat. But rain and flying scud were like buckshot; they stung as they hit the skin. For a heart-stopping moment Lee thought that the houseboat would miss the barge entirely. A veering gust of wind swung the flat-bottomed scow away and it commenced to slide swiftly from the barge's side. Then the heavy bridle holding her to her anchor snaked up out of the water, not two feet from the houseboat's stern. If the smaller craft had been riding directly above those hawsers it would have been cut in two as if by an up-swinging cleaver.

"Watch it!" he yelled at Linda. "Now! Jump!"

The swinging corner of the houseboat seemed only to touch the heavy planking of the barge, but the shock almost capsized the tiny scow. Lee, pulling his muscles tight, saw Linda's slim body fall forward. He gasped, thinking she was going into the ribbon of water between the two craft. He staggered forward, wildly, trying to catch her. But then, miraculously, she was scrambling up over the edge of the deck, her hair flying in the wind, her soaking clothes glued tightly to her. She flattened out on the deck and twisted around to help him.

The houseboat had fallen away in the trough of the waves. Now it was sweeping again toward the barge. Its deckhouse was tilted crazily; one edge of its roof must have hit something. The whole thing was falling to pieces under, over and around him. Red's weight was almost too much. Lee put his feet wide apart and waited. He had a dim vision of men dashing out of a doorway on the big barge. Called out, he thought, distantly, by the sound of the crash.

Once again the drifting houseboat struck. With every ounce of his strength Lee tossed Red's body like a sack of cement toward the overhanging deck.

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There was a tremendous crash. The sound of smashing timbers was, for the moment, louder than the howling of the wind. Marvin leaped. His fingers caught the edge of something. A wave licked at his legs. All the wind in the world was pushing at him, trying to throw him off into a sea which was suddenly filled with churning lengths of wood. Where was Red? Lee couldn't see him. He couldn't see anything except the long parallel lines of decking right under his eyes as he tried and tried to pull his body up over the edge of that deck. A floating timber came out of the water and slammed at his right leg. A new gust of wind yanked at his clothes. He was about finished. And he was too tired to care.

A pair of girl's shoes presented themselves straight in front of his dimming eyes. Hands were tugging at his arms.

Linda's voice screamed through the wind: "Scoop! Cash! Come here and help me! Come here, quickly!"

That was a funny one, he thought. Those two mugs helping to pull him out of the water when a little while ago they had been trying to kill him! There was no sense to it. But then, there was no sense to anything now. So he was not particularly surprised, or especially grateful, when strong hands got hold of him and dragged him up over the edge of the deck.

SLOWLY, groggily, he pushed himself to his hands and knees. Leaning hard against the thrust of the wind, he got to his feet. The deck, in comparison with that of the houseboat, seemed as steady as the Rock of Gibraltar, but he knew it was not really steady, for he was staggering in a sort of a slow waltz as he tried to hold his balance. In the water, almost beside him, Linda's houseboat was drifting away, a mass of shattered timbers and odd hunks of what had once been a deckhouse. Beyond, where the ring of light from the barge faded into rainswept darkness, seas leaped and danced wildly, jumping into the air and then flattening out as the wind cut off their tops.

Steadying himself, Lee turned. Red Malloy, dead or still unconscious, was sprawled on the wet deck at Linda's feet. Cash Childers was staring down at the inert figure. Scoop Sloper was looking at Linda with his mismated eyes and it seemed to Lee that Scoop was trying to explain something. Snatches of conversation came downwind.

". . . thought you were asleep in that spare cabin," Scoop was saying. "I didn't know . . ."

"So you shot up my houseboat and almost—" Linda retorted in a voice thin with anger.

Lee took a single staggering step toward Cash Childers. He pointed down at Red Malloy. "Do I have to carry him all alone?"

"So far as I'm concerned," Cash Childers shouted through the storm, "you can just leave him here."

"Cash!" Scoop yelled. "Go ahead and give him a hand."

Cash took Red's legs and Lee carried Red's heavy shoulders. Together they reeled down the lee side of the deck while the others trooped after them. The instant they were inside the alleyway, and the door closed behind them, it seemed as if the storm had been chopped off with a knife. So accustomed had Lee become to the chaos outside that he scarcely heard anything now. Anything, that is, except the radio and the flippant sound of that almost took Lee's breath away. He had just seen a score of men drown. A machine-gunner had tried to kill all those within Linda's houseboat. Red Malloy was either dead or close to it. And pulling, hauling, battering at the big barge was a hurricane which was threatening to kill everyone aboard the barge before morning.

But somewhere, in a New York hotel, a swing band was playing a swing piece and here, in the midst of inconceivable chaos, their music filled the interior of the barge.

And the name of the piece they were playing was, of all things, an old one named, *Let's Put Out the Lights and Go to Bed.*

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CHAPTER XIV

BRAWL

A MAN was standing at the corner of the alleyway. A stranger, with pale gray eyes and almost colorless hair. He looked thirty or thirty-five; his eyes were very old, though, as if they had seen too many things—mostly wicked ones. Steadily he watched Lee and Cash Childers as they lugged Red Malloy's sagging figure past the line of cabin doors.

"What are you doing?" he asked Scoop Sloper. "Saving that stiff for a souvenir? You'll never learn, will you?"

Marvin started and almost let his hands slip out from under Red's shoulders. He recognized the voice. It was the man who had been talking to Scoop when Buck had been listening at the partition—the man who had leaped aboard from the cruiser. Abrams!

The man's accurate eyes observed Lee's start of recognition, and a very thin smile flickered across his pale lips. But he stood aside and let the little procession stagger by without further comment.

The door to the cabin was open, swinging back and forth with the uneven motion of the barge. Cash led the way inside.

Callously he twisted himself around and dumped Red's legs on the lower berth. Carefully, Lee lowered Red's body to the bunk and inched it as best he could into a comfortable position. He straightened up and swung around to face Childers.

"What's the idea of being so rough?"

Cash, his mouth jerking at the corner, bristled. "Don't you like it?"

"No, I don't like it."

"I warned you," said the quiet voice of Abrams from the door. "Scoop, you'll never learn that—"

Linda, thrusting her strong, slim body forward, pushed Cash Childers aside. She stopped before Lee, her lovely face flushed and angry. "Do you have to fight all the time?" she demanded. "Haven't you any sense at all?" She wheeled around and faced Cash, and Scoop and Abrams, who were standing there in an attitude of gathering tension. "Will you get out of here!" she flamed at him. "No matter what you think of him, Red's hurt. I'm going to wash his face and bandage him. Get out, I tell you!"

She put out her two hands and pushed Cash Childers' chest. He stood, undecided, for a moment. She kicked his shins, pushed him again.

"What difference," Scoop said, carelessly, "will a couple of hours make? They can't walk ashore."

And as if to prove it, the end of the barge rose to a precarious angle, a hissing wave rushed along the deck outside the shutter. They all stared at the blank surface of that shutter as if they could see through it to the sweep of the storm beyond. The barge settled again and a small sound of released breath came from all their lips.

SCOOP SLOPER shrugged his heavy shoulders and turned away. He walked past Abrams into the alleyway. Cash Childers followed him. Abrams remained on the threshold, his eyes looking unpleasantly at Linda.

"If we ever get ashore," he said in a voice which seemed too low to carry above the storm, but did carry to Linda's ears, "I'd like to get to know you better."

Linda shrugged angrily. "Just so you go away now."

He smiled. "Remember, that's a date."

Then he was gone. Twin spots of anger burned against Linda's white cheeks and her eyes had darkened until they were almost black.

"I can't stand that man looking at me!" she burst out. "It feels like clammy wet washrags running all over me!"

"Who is he, Linda?"

"I—I think," she said, almost in a whisper, "that he's the devil himself!"

That was all she would say. She dampened a towel, carefully swabbed Red's pale, blood-streaked face. Twice Marvin had to put out his hand to steady her as she staggered to the sudden rolling of the barge.

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And whenever he touched her it seemed as if a charge of electricity ran through him. Jennifer was now a vague picture in the background of time.

This Linda; something would always be happening to her. Life with her would never be static. He watched her now, bending over Red's colorless face and wiping the black, dried blood away. Not a peaceful face, really, but who wanted peace?

"What are you scowling at?" she asked, catching him unawares.

"You."

"Why?"

"Because you're in with a gang of thieves and murderers," he said flatly. "And you don't mind it. You're even thinking of marrying one of them. You—you—" He took a single step forward, his hand drawn back. She did not move. She just stood there, watching him. He caught himself even as his hand started forward to slap her. "Somebody ought to take a club to you and beat some sense into you. That's what!"

And then he turned and left the cabin before he lost control of himself. All his life he had believed, profoundly, that a man who struck a girl ranked seven steps below a worm, and he had been right on the point of smacking her.

A tremendous jerking motion of the alleyway floor almost threw Lee from his feet. Now he had time to pay attention to the storm, it was obvious that the wind had increased in intensity and that the seas must now be rolling almost unhindered over the top of the interlocking steel bulkhead. The high-pitched scream of the gale around the corners of the square deckhouse was a sound which cut into his eardrums. And the floor was rocking like the deck of a ship at sea. Aboard this great barge it was now nearly as bad as it had been aboard Linda's tiny houseboat only a little while ago.

It was strange, walking down this corridor where, but a few hours ago, workmen had marched back and forth on their way to and from the job. Cabin doors were open and Lee caught glimpses of empty bunks. The rooms looked as if their occupants had just stepped out, planning to return in a moment. . . .

Lee emerged into the mess hall, where the radio was still playing swing. Last time he had seen that big room, it had been filled with men. Now there were only five. Of these, two were workmen who were moving swiftly from one shuttered window to another, inspecting the battens and calking, the cracks through which rain water was being driven into the mess hall.

SCOOP, Cash Childers and the white-faced Abrams were sitting at one of the long tables. Their heads were close together and they were talking to one another with frequent cautious glances at the nearby workmen as if they did not wish to be overheard. Cash Childers' mouth was twitching as hard as ever. Lee, pausing at the door, wondered why it did not tire the man all out, using his face muscles like that. Abrams' face was the color of biscuit dough and his lips were so thin he seemed to have no mouth at all. His long, tapering fingers were tapping restlessly, keeping time to the swing music from the radio.

At this moment the catchy rhythm faded out and a Miami announcer cut in:

"We now give you the latest weather bulletin," he said.

The voice was in some concrete and steel studio somewhere, Marvin thought, in no greater danger than that of getting wet on the way home. The three men at the table stopped talking, lifted their heads in an attitude of listening. Abrams' pale eyes saw Lee. They expanded like those of a cat in the dark.

"The tropical disturbance which is now sweeping with full hurricane force across the lower Florida Keys," the announcer went on, "is now central a short distance northeast of Key West and is moving in a northerly or north-northwesterly direction. If it continues on its present course it will pass inland at or near Cape Sable early tomorrow morning. Storm warnings are displayed from West Palm Beach to

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Sarasota and hurricane warnings from Miami to Fort Meyers."

"It'll hit us right on the snoot," Cash said, bleakly.

Abrams made a curt gesture for silence.

"In Miami," the announcer continued, "anxiety is felt for the safety of dwellers in the Everglades, where 2,200 persons were killed in the hurricane of 1928, and for residents of the keys, where nearly six hundred died in the Labor Day storm of 1935. They have all been warned to seek high ground and are being evacuated by the Red Cross wherever possible.

"It is reported that some thirty-five men employed by the Tropical Construction Company are marooned on a key directly in the path of the storm. A rescue boat, dispatched this afternoon from Miami, is reported to be aground on a sandbar near Matecombe Key. Two Coast Guard patrol boats, the Pandora, at Miami, and the Nemesis, at St. Petersburg, have been notified, but it is very doubtful if these men can be reached before morning, when the center of the storm will have passed over them.

"More storm bulletins at frequent intervals all night."

A man raced into the room, his clothes sticking wetly to his body, his face reddened by the wind, his eyes wide and bloodshot.

"Hey, boss!" he yelled at Scoop. "The dredger's busted loose! She ain't there any more!" He took a long breath. "And the bottom's dropped out of the barometer. I just tapped it and it dropped three-tenths, just like that!"

As if to confirm what he was saying, the whine of the wind lifted to a thin shriek and although the doors and windows were closed against the storm, a definite draught blew down the alleyway and into the mess hall.

"Why didn't you come sooner, Abrams?" Scoop snarled. "You knew the storm was on the way."

A faint flush stained Abrams' pale cheeks. He surveyed Scoop coldly. Neither Scoop nor Cash had seen Marvin standing there on the threshold, and Abrams seemed to have dismissed him from his mind. There was high temper in Scoop's bristly face; Cash's lips were jerking unpleasantly. The only things alive about Abrams were his washed-out eyes; there was a controlled anger in them that licked out in a living flame. Looking at him, Lee was conscious of an intuitive antipathy which made his skin crawl, his hands clench into fists.

"I got here as fast as I could," Abrams said to Scoop, "and as soon as I could."

"If you'd come sooner," Scoop snarled, "you and Cash and Linda and I could've been in the hotel at Miami by now."

"I gave you credit," Abrams said in a thin tone, "for being able to control your men. If they hadn't rushed my boat, we'd be running well ahead of the storm by now. That's on your record, Scoop, if we live through this. I shall remind you of it some time."

"You're reminding me of it now," Scoop said, but his voice was not as challenging as it had been.

"And what about Swaybell?" Marvin asked, stepping forward into the mess hall.

SCOOP and Cash started in their chairs and swung around to face him. This almost threw them to the floor, for at that moment a wild lurch of the deck under their feet caused their chairs almost to upset. Abrams turned his eyes toward Lee. He looked as if nothing in all his life had ever startled him.

"Well, what about Swaybell?" Scoop snapped in an ugly voice.

"You tell me," Marvin said. "If the workmen hadn't swamped the motor boat, would you have taken Swaybell to the hotel at Miami with you? Or would you have left him to machine-gun us?"

Abrams' pale lips lengthened into what might have been a smile. But Scoop did not smile. Nor did Cash.

"Did anybody tell you," Scoop said in a low, flat voice, "that you were going out of your way to look for trouble?"

"Yes," Marvin said, easily. "I do seem to be, don't I? That and a couple of other

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things. I'll talk to you about those after this night is over. There mightn't be any use now."

Scoop turned to Abrams, who was watching quietly, impassively. "This is the bird who said he wanted a job as assistant timekeeper. And he pretended he had never seen Red Malloy before in his life."

"Why would I have seen Red Malloy?" Marvin asked. He couldn't seem to stop.

Scoop slowly got out of his chair. "Don't play stupid with me, fella," he said.

Marvin could hear his angry pulses pounding in his ears. He saw Scoop Sloper through a bright red mist of hatred. Every muscle in him craved battle.

Scoop started across the room. It had to come some time, Marvin thought; so it might as well be now.

"Sloper!" Abrams cracked. "Sit down!"

But Scoop paid no attention. Through a new burst of swing from the radio, and through a shriller, wilder scream from the wind outside, he sent his raging voice to Marvin.

"I should have killed you when you first came aboard."

Matter-of-factly, like that. As if killing were a prosaic task, like stamping on a cockroach.

Scoop walked toward Marvin with that peculiar bent-knee shuffle he had used when walking toward Granelli, away back in a past that was almost beyond remembering. Lee stood waiting near the door, balancing himself against the rocking of the floor under his feet. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Cash Childers sliding quietly around to the left, trying to get behind him. Lee moved backward, got his shoulders against the wall.

It was queer, standing there and waiting, instant after instant, with perhaps the end of his life scant minutes away. He did not fool himself. Scoop Sloper intended to stamp out his life, just as he had Granelli's.

The barge heeled unexpectedly with a quick, jerking motion that threw everybody off balance. Scoop, within a dozen feet of Marvin, staggered, took a dozen crazy steps backward and began again to plod patiently toward him. Cash fell to his knees, pushed himself up and waited, spread-legged, until the following swoop of the floor had come and gone.

"Scoop!" Abrams called. "I'm telling you. Don't."

Scoop Sloper did not even turn his head. All Lee's muscles flowed into readiness. It seemed as if an electric current were running through his body. There was a grim heedlessness on his sunburned face, and a look of dark unrestraint in his narrowed eyes. It simply wasn't Marvin Lee.

He saw Scoop drag in a long breath, gather himself for the rush. And then Scoop plunged. Two hundred pounds of hurtling flesh and bone, commanded by a brain which knew all the tricks of savage fighting. Lee lanced out with his right fist. His knuckles slid along Scoop's oncoming face, raked across Scoop's cheek bone. And then Scoop's body slammed into his. Crashed him back against the wall. Scoop's heavy shoulder jammed with terrific force into his stomach and drove the wind out of his lungs in a gusty sigh.

A SHOCKING pain tore through his body, almost paralyzing his muscles. He was pinned against the wall and Scoop's burly shoulder had almost collapsed his lungs. Scoop's sledge-hammer fists were exploding against his belly in an agonizing tattoo of flailing punches. Marvin's muscles seemed to be turning to water.

Scoop's bullet-shaped head was down below Lee's shoulder. He could see Scoop's neck cords stretched like steel bars. He brought his fist up high, swept it down in a rabbit punch which caused Scoop to lurch forward and throw his arms around Marvin in an involuntary clinch for support. Scoop's whole body sagged for an instant and the weight of his arms almost dragged Lee to the floor.

Savagely he brought his knee up with all the force of his back and leg muscles. He felt it gouge into yielding muscles. Scoop's belly-deep sob of agony was a welcome thing to hear. It helped Lee forget his own pain, his own weakness from that first

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solar-plexus blow. Scoop's massive arms slipped a little. Lee swept his right fist down and around and then up in a wildly unscientific uppercut. His knuckles smashed against Scoop's nose and did terrible things to it.

Out of chaos and through the screaming of the storm, Lee heard Abrams' voice, coldly incisive.

"Cash! Stand away! Let Scoop handle it!"

And even in that frantic moment, Marvin had time to wonder how it happened that Abrams could command Cash so curtly. Was Abrams after all the real boss?

Scoop, pulling away, lifted a blood-smeared face. His nose had almost ceased to be a nose. It looked like a squashed tomato. But his gray eye glittered with a metallic sheen that was bright with fury. An animal-like sound came from his throat. He spread his great arms wide, set his feet against the rolling of the deck and swayed forward to pull Marvin into a bear hug.

Instinct alone whipped Lee's body sidewise. He had no knowledge of barroom brawls, no experience to tell him what to do when boxing ended and fighting began. He only knew that in this combat there were no rules except this—the best man lived and the other died.

Scoop's massive body lunged ahead. But with a speed he did not know he possessed, Lee whirled aside, ducked under clutching arms and had turned by the time Scoop's arms hit the wall.

Scoop pushed himself around. He shoved his bloody face forward in invitation for Marvin to hit it. Lee went after it, but the face was not there by the time his fist reached the place where it had been. It had ducked low and Scoop's hamlike fist slammed wrist-deep into Lee's stomach. Once again his breath blew out of him and he flopped forward on his face, gagging in great retching sobs as he tried to get his breath. He rolled helplessly over trying to get some air into his lungs.

He caught a glimpse of Scoop standing over him, glaring bloodily down at him. Already he was leaning forward, gathering his muscles together to jump with both feet on Marvin's unprotected body. Lee caught half a breath. He put all the strength he had left in a crazily sweeping blow at Scoop's legs. His forearm knocked Scoop's feet out from under him. Wildly he rolled over and in an awkward crablike crawl, he scrambled on top of Scoop's body. Scoop slammed methodically up at his face. Rolling his head away as best he could, Lee patiently got both knees up on Scoop's body. Scoop's jabbing fingers poked up like a striking snake, reaching for Lee's eyes. Viciously Marvin jounced up and down on his knees, hearing Scoop grunt every time his weight came down on him. With the third jounce he heard one of Scoop's ribs give with a dry, crackling sound like a dead stick breaking. Scoop screamed and rolled over with a convulsive jerk that carried Marvin off balance. Falling, he heard Abrams' sardonic voice, as from a million miles away:

"Scoop thinks he's hard. Stay away, Cash, and we'll see just how hard he is and—"

Lee's shoulder hit the deck with a terrific crash. He knew enough to squirm over on his stomach. He tried to rise to his hands and knees, but Scoop's great body flopped on him and flattened him out so suddenly that his breath was again almost knocked out of him. Scoop was astride him, riding him like a jockey, pressing him down to the rolling floor. Scoop's hands battered against his head and cheeks. Scoop's clawing fingers reached around, tried to claw his eyes out, but Lee hid his face in his crooked arms. Scoop's thumbs, strong as steel hooks, dug into the soft flesh between Lee's collar bone and shoulder muscles and tried to pry Lee's collar bone out by the roots. The pain was a white flame of purest agony. Lee reared back, felt the back of his skull smash full into Scoop's face. Scoop gave a queer, bubbling cry, flailed wildly, unheedingly, down at both sides of Lee's rising head.

Something was happening. Lee's violence-drugged brain didn't know whether

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Scoop was somehow pulling him up into the air or whether the entire barge was rising like a kite. Scoop's weight fell off Marvin's body. Lee tried to find something to hold onto, feeling himself rolling, too. But there were no cracks in the floor deep enough to get his fingers into. Uncontrollably he rolled toward the leeward wall down a slanting deck which was lifting like the smooth surface of a seesaw. All around him there was a great crashing as chairs and tables began to slide, then to capsize and go tumbling down that careening floor.

THEN even the noise of that crashing furniture was obliterated in a Titanic roar as an immense sea broke over the deck outside and smashed against the deckhouse. The barge, still heeling, quivered like a beaten animal. The screaming of the wind was a saw-edged knife, cutting cleanly through chaos.

Marvin, still rolling, caught momentary glimpses of chairs and tables coming down on him. This, he thought dimly, was the end. In an instant he would be enveloped in swirling water. . . . Instinctively he wrapped his arms around his head as he brought up solidly against the leeward wall and was pounced upon by hard-edged chairs and tables. He clung to consciousness by sheer strength of will. Already he had stood more than he could; now there was this battering to take, too.

He felt the deck beneath him slue sideward, then begin to sink with a swoop that left his outraged stomach far behind. Dumbly, hopelessly, he waited for whatever might be going to happen. There was nothing he could do against the incredible fury of nature; he could only wait, passively, to see whether he would die in the next few seconds—or later.

Through his body Marvin felt two small, sharp jerks. Immediately the barge began to lift. It shook itself like a wet cat; the deck under him, with a new and freer movement, began to slide. Gone was the uneasy, snubbed motion it had had before. Now it swung and heeled and yawed wildly —but differently.

Suddenly the knowledge came to Lee that the barge had snapped her bridles and was racing away into the night, into the hurricane-swept waters of Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico—into the pits of Black Hell itself!

CHAPTER XV

PACKAGES

IT SEEMED silly, now, to think of such puny things as human hatreds, so dwarfed were they by the hurricane's fury. Marvin burrowed his way from under the pile of chairs and tables. He stared around, dazed, hardly daring to believe that the barge still floated and that he still lived. It was difficult to sit up; his body ached from the battering Scoop Sloper had given it.

The barge was creaking and groaning as if it, too, had stood more than it could. There was a swishing sound immediately below the deck; vaguely Marvin knew it to be water swashing back and forth in the flat-bottomed hull. Every timber, every plank, was complaining and he wondered why the whole structure did not just give up, and let the hurricane do as it willed. But the radio was not giving up. As if it were laughing sardonically at some ribald joke of its own, the loud speaker sang *I Get a Kick Out of You.*

Lee looked around. Cash Childers appeared from under a pile of chairs and tables. His mouth was working harder than ever with that spasmodic tic, but when his shifty eyes met Lee's, they were almost expressionless.

Abrams sat up against the lee wall, some twenty feet aft of the spot where Lee was trying to push himself to his feet. Abrams' thin body swayed this way and that and his pale gaze wandered incredulously around the mess hall, focussing upon nothing in particular. But even in that moment of vagueness, he looked as dangerous as a coiled diamondback rattler.

He turned his face toward Cash and his lips moved. But not even Cash appeared

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to hear what he was trying to say. The wind was like a screaming fire siren, rising and falling in a banshee shriek. There was a roaring outside the deckhouse which might have been waves smashing against the upperstructure. Or it might have been rain, striking horizontally like bullets. And the wind was slamming it against the house and forcing it in around the shutters. It was seeping in through invisible cracks in the wall. There were a score of tiny leaks in the roof through which drops came, falling at an angle, this way and that, like a pendulum. There were already a dozen thin rivulets of water pursuing crazy courses up and down hill on the tilting floor.

Scoop Childers pushed himself to his feet a little way aft. Looking over the top of an overturned mess table, Marvin could see his smashed face, his great shoulders and arms rising as if pushed up by an elevator. His face looked awful. There wasn't any shape to his nose. It was just a crimson blob. Scoop was breathing carefully, his shoulders rising and falling with each shallow breath as if he were carrying a great weight on them. Lee, watching him, remembered the dry snapping sound made by the breaking of Scoop's rib under his jouncing knees. He wished he had broken them all.

Marvin frowned. What had happened to Linda and Red when the big barge had careened over on her beam end? Lee had a picture in his mind of Red, fallen to the floor, and of Linda, trying in vain to lift his heavy body back to the berth. It was almost as if they had called him, so insistent was his impulse to hurry to them. But would Scoop let him go? Lee glanced toward the alleyway. The heavy door which separated mess hall from corridor had come off its hook. It was now swinging with the roll of the barge, banging against the stop.

THE sound of running feet came through the shriek of the wind and the crashing of the seas outside. Six men came herding aft along the alleyway, caroming from one wall to another as the swinging deck rolled under them. One was Garside, his arm done up in a bloodstained bandage. Another was of the engineer's crew—Marvin couldn't remember his name. The others were all laborers whom he had seen out on the job.

"Boss!" Garside shouted as they staggered across the mess-hall floor. "The hull is filling with water! It's coming up through the deck forward!"

Scoop looked at them with a dazed stare.

"You know where the main pump is," he said in a drugged voice. He pointed listlessly toward the engineers' storeroom aft of the dining hall. "Get back there and pump. Cash, go back there with them. There are some barrels of engine oil there. Fill one of the washstand bowls with cotton waste and then pour a lot of oil into the waste. It'll drain out slowly and make an oil slick to help lay the seas. Hurry up now and—"

His voice chopped off short. Lee stood up and Scoop saw him instantly. Marvin got himself set and began to march toward the swinging door which opened into the alleyway.

"Where are *you* going?" Scoop roared.

Lee kept right on walking. He turned his head slowly, throwing his glance back into the room.

"I'm going to my cabin, if it matters," he called back, trying to lay his voice flat and expressionless across the room.

Twenty feet, perhaps, to that door; it stretched out like a million miles and he knew he was spreading his luck pretty thin. Abrams tipped his pale face to one side. His colorless stare sharpened and a look of expectancy came into it. Cash Childers' right hand was sliding toward a lumpy coat pocket. Above the blood-drenched lower half of his face, Scoop's mismated eyes were ablaze with fury. His shoulders were hunched forward and he was reaching toward something that Lee could not see.

"Stand still!" Scoop roared.

One foot after another, again, Lee thought. With each forward step cutting down the space between him and that door.

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Cutting down, too, his sliver-thin margin of time before those men went into action.

"Garside!" Scoop bellowed. "Stop him, you men!"

It was coming now. The six men were a little to one side. They hesitated a perceptible instant. Marvin dashed for the door. His hand dived into his pocket, wrenched his gun out. He saw the men diving to stop him. The deck heeled precariously. Lee staggered, lost three precious steps toward the door. From back where Scoop and the others were came the heavy slam of an automatic. The bullet sighed close past Lee's head, whacked solidly against the wall. Lee ducked, went on running. The workmen were closing in, blocking him off from the door.

Something bright glittered in Garside's hand. A long thin sliver of light. A knife.

"Get him, Garside!" Scoop squalled.

The knife went up. Garside was only four or five feet away now, the others right after him. The knife started to come down. Lee hardly realized that his gun hand was flying up, but he felt the butt of the gun recoil against his palm as he put one bullet after another into Garside's oncoming figure. It was a dying man that hit him, a dead man that he hurled back directly into the path of the others. One sidestepped. Plunged straight at Lee. But Lee was too close to the door to be stopped now. He raked the barrel of his gun down across the face of the man who leaped at him, left a deep runnel of crimson to mark the gouging progress of the gun. The man screamed and pitched forward.

The door. Lee went through it like a rabbit scuttling into its hole. Impulsively he slammed the door shut behind him. He heard bodies colliding with it on the other side. He skidded to a stop, stared at the knob. Below it was a sliding bolt. He slapped it with his palm, sliding it shut. The knob rattled behind him. Just above his head a shot came through, leaving a ragged little hole to mark its passing.

Lee turned and sprinted down the alleyway. There was hurly-burly behind him—and the sound of the radio—blocked off by that heavy door. Now there was only the high-pitched shriek of the wind and the never-ceasing crash of the waves.

There was the door of his stateroom—his and Red's—just ahead. He didn't stop to think that penned in that tiny cabin he would be in a worse position than he had been before. He just wanted to get there, to see Red and Linda.

He went down that slanting alleyway in long, zigzag strides and slid to a halt in front of the cabin door. It was open. He plunged into the room. But even before his flying feet had crossed the threshold, his heart went into a tailspin, landed cold and heavy against his stomach.

The cabin was empty. Linda and Red were not there.

HE STOOD there for a moment, hardly believing the emptiness of that tiny room. It had not occurred to him that they would have gone. Gone where? There was so much of the barge to search, and time was short. Even through the tumult of the hurricane he could hear a banging from down the corridor where Scoop and the rest would be hammering down the door.

He bolted out of the cabin. The barge was struck by a great sea which heeled her over on her beam ends and Marvin, trotting down the corridor, opening one cabin door after another, slammed against the wall with dizzying force. So far over did the whole structure lean that he expected it to capsize or to split asunder like an overripe melon. A barge was not a ship. It was big and oblong and flat-bottomed, never designed to ride hurricane seas. But somehow it came back from its breath-taking roll. It wallowed up and down and over the succeeding seas which crashed deafeningly against the decks and upper-structure—and it neither capsized nor sank.

Here was Scoop's office. Lee twisted the knob and threw his shoulder against the door. It opened and his momentum plumeted him into the room. Red and Linda were in there—kneeling on the floor. Speed ran through Red's muscles. His right hand shifted with the speed of light and a

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big revolver seemed to leap into it. Before Lee could speak, Red's gun slanted upward toward his stomach and Red's eyes, their pupils narrowed down to pinpoints, were glaring into his with the impact of a physical blow.

"Red!" Linda screamed, and lunged for the gun.

Red's breath flowed out in a sigh. The gun arm relaxed.

"Son," Red said, reproachfully, "you scared me and a scared man shoots first and remembers to ask later. Next time blow a horn or something."

Lee pushed his back against the door and locked it. Red's face was drawn with fine lines of pain and weariness. There was a great smear of clotted blood over his left ear and he moved his head carefully as if every change of position stabbed him.

Linda's smooth young face was tipped up toward him and her blue eyes looked very dark, incredibly big, against the paleness of her cheeks.

"What—what happened?" she asked, sharply.

"Better lock all the doors," Lee said, his voice steadying. "They'll be here in a minute or two. I—I just managed to get clear of them. What are you doing down there, anyway?"

"Linda," Red said, calmly, "run through into Scoop's sleeping quarters and lock the door leading out to the alleyway. Might be handy to have two cabins to knock around in." His unhurried voice brought Linda to her feet, pushed her through a connecting door into a second room just forward of the office. "You been fighting again," Red said, accusingly. "You look like you been crawling through a meat grinder."

He got up stiffly and brushed off his knees. Now Lee could see the full expanse of the floor. A small hatchway had been removed, exposing a concealed lazarette underneath. And neatly stacked in that lazarette were a score or more small, sealed packages, about the size of cigar boxes. Instantly Lee's memory leaped back. He recalled Linda's exact words about Abrams' cruiser. "It brings some packages," she had said, brokenly, during those horrible moments after the overturned cruiser had spilled its human cargo into the windswept sea. "They are supposed to be for the commissary, but there's something funny about it. When I asked Dad about it he was scared and told me never to ask again."

Lee pointed down at the lazarette. "What's in those packages?" he demanded.

Red Malloy's expression hardened, became very grim.

"Dope!" he said, shortly.

CHAPTER XVI

"SCRAM!"

A TREMENDOUS sea, greater than any that had gone before, greater, even, than the one which had ended Lee's battle with Scoop, smashed against the barge. It plucked the great structure up, shook it and seemed to throw it away, screaming at it the while. Red Malloy was flung into the corner of the alleyway bulkhead.

Lee, feeling it coming, cried, "Linda, look out!" and clung hard to Scoop's big desk. Tons of water smashed down on the decks outside the shuttered window, crashed against the substantial walls of the deckhouse, while the wind rose with a sustained shriek that was like the wailing of a million ghosts.

Lee found himself on hands and knees, his feet falling out from under him, while he clung desperately to the heavy desk. The desk itself started to slide toward the inner partition. Lee pushed himself away from it lest he be crushed, and rolled over and over, as he followed it down-hill toward the partition. Somehow, through the incredible noise of pounding water and of screaming wind, he managed to hear Linda crying his name.

Patiently he began to crawl up that slanting floor toward the door which gave into Scoop's sleeping cabin. The barge seemed to slide down an almost vertical mountain, while Lee climbed grimly. Then it hung there, and he knew another moun-

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tain must be suspended over it, waiting to drop an avalanche of water down upon it. But while it hung, he scrambled on hands and knees, swiftly, toward that connecting door. And by the time the avalanche broke, and crashed down upon the almost foundering barge, he dragged himself through the door.

At first he could not see Linda at all. And his heart almost turned over inside him. Then he saw her feet, projecting out from behind a huge clothes-press which had become jammed between floor and opposite bulkhead. The deck tilted as all the water in the world seemed to fall upon deck and deckhouse outside. He let himself go with the careening floor. The decking brush-burned his hands and knees as he slid. He slammed up against the lower half of the clothes-press with a jolt that all but knocked the wind out of him. He squirmed around, looked anxiously, and a wave of complete relief swept over him. She was not crushed by that tilting weight. She was just jammed there, and could not get out. Unceremoniously he grabbed her ankles and hauled her out.

"You—you didn't have to be so rough," she complained.

Footsteps hammered along the alleyway outside the door.

"So they're out!" Red breathed, and pulled his gun out of his pocket.

But the racing feet went by the closed door without stopping.

"Get out of the way," Lee snapped.

Linda obeyed. He put his shoulder against that clothes-press, hitched its lower end farther away from the wall. The thing fell with a tremendous crash. Lee began to inch it over toward the door.

"Well, what's the matter?" he threw at Linda. "Afraid to callous the hands, or something?"

"Nobody could dream how I hate you!" she breathed, but put her surprising young strength against the bulky thing, helping to push it, inch by inch, toward the door.

"What was that?" Red yelled, popping into the cabin.

Lee had no breath with which to answer, but the instant Red saw them pushing at the clothes-press, there was no need for it. Red put his big shoulder against the corner and the heavy cabinet slid solidly against the door.

"Neat," Red said.

He glanced around, climbed the rising floor to Scoop's berth. He yanked off the mattress and laid it over the clothes-press.

"I promised my dying grandpa," he murmured, "that I'd take all precautions possible against dying sooner than heaven willed it."

He looked at the reinforcements to the door with the eyes of an artist. It seemed to Lee that Red was actually enjoying this turmoil. Lee's own pulses were racing and through his body was surging a wild tide of excitement that was almost akin to drunkenness. Linda and Red were here with him; on the other side of the seaward wall all the devils of hell were hurling wind and waves at their tiny cabin; on the inboard side Scoop and Abrams and the rest were coursing like greyhounds up and down the alleyway, seeking Lee's life despite the fact that their own lives were being sought by that most terrible of all enemies—nature on the rampage. It was a strange feeling, that of actually relishing this wild exhilaration that raced through all his nerves, all his veins. Obscurely, Marvin wondered what had become of the Marvin Lee, the bank clerk, whom he had always known. Gone, now, gone with so many of the other things that had once been a part of his life.

"Would you be taking root there?" Red Malloy asked him, politely. "Or might I persuade you to help me in the other cabin?"

"Oh, well," Marvin said, shrugging away all the wraiths which bound him to the life he had once known. "Nuts."

"Nuts to what?" Red demanded.

"You wouldn't understand," Lee said, and started for the other cabin.

THE three of them shoved the big desk up against the door. They piled a couple of chairs against that, interlocking

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the chair legs like jackstraws against the crazy swinging of the floor. Water suddenly gushed into the stateroom, spouting up through the locker in which were stored the sinister packages. Red pounced at the hatchway, rescued one of those wrapped and sealed packages, put it carefully in the desk drawer.

"One's plenty," he said. "The rest can melt, for all of me."

Lee stared at him, his eyes narrowing, his sunburned face becoming very grim indeed. He took two steps toward Red Malloy and stood towering over him, his feet spraddled against the swinging of the floor.

"It's time we had an understanding, Red," he said, pushing his voice against the shrill howling of the wind.

Linda caught her breath, put one slender hand on Lee's sleeve.

"It might be, at that," Red agreed, his gaze fully meeting Marvin's.

"Who *are* you, anyway?"

"A fair question," Red said, grinning faintly. "But you're the younger. Maybe you'd better unload first. Who, as the saying goes, might you be?"

Lee felt Linda's fingers go tight on his arm. Deliberately he avoided her anxious gaze.

"I was sent here by the bank that loaned money on this construction job," Lee said, grimly.

"Yeah, the Fifth National," nodded Red, cocking his head a little as more footsteps galloped by outside.

"What do you know about the Fifth National?"

"You tell it," Red said. "Then I'll tell it." Once again he listened to the sound on the other side of the door. "Maybe you'd better speed it up, too," he suggested, mildly.

"Costs were higher than they should be," Lee went on. "And the president thought there was crooked work going on, so he thought if I were assistant timekeeper, I could smell it out through the books and time sheets and ledgers. You see—" His tongue stumbled, but honesty drove him on. "You see, I was—well, just a bookkeeper, and Mr. Avery thought maybe he ought to send a detective or—"

"Did he, now?" Red sighed. He looked almost sheepish as he reached into his trousers pocket and pulled out a shining silver badge which he displayed in his cupped hand. "I might do, son," he added. "You see, I work for Uncle Sam."

Lee stared. "You—you mean you're a G-man?"

"A newspaper name," Red said deprecatingly. "The Department's been getting kind of upset about all the narcotics slipping into south Florida from Cuba and we finally traced it to Abrams and Scoop, but we were never able to make a seizure. I needed a little exercise, so I was put on a shovel-swinging job here. Abrams brings the stuff over from Cuba in that cruiser. And every once in a while some other boat comes from Miami, or Tampa, or somewhere, picks it up off this barge and distributes it. If a Coast Guard boat moseys around too close, it goes overboard, see? It's been a nice little racket and they've done right well with it. But the trouble is, Scoop got too rough, and too greedy. Too many killings in 'self-defense' got to the ears of the Coast Guard, and then this nickel-snatching racket he and Cash Childers had of frisking the boys at craps and poker. There was bound to be a belly-ache one day, and there was. And then this timekeeper—"

He started and glanced apologetically at Linda. She was standing as rigid as a bar of steel, holding onto the big desk to keep herself from falling when the deck slid and heeled under her.

"Well, what about the timekeeper?" she asked, unsteadily. "What did my father have to do with it?"

"Maybe you'd better tell me, sister," Red said, gently.

"He didn't—" Linda began in a strangled voice.

But at that moment there was a tremendous hammering on the door and the knob shook violently. "Visitors," Red said, glumly. "It won't be long, now."

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"Lee!" came Scoop's voice from the outside. "Are you in there?"

"Trouble," Lee said, grimly. "Linda. Come on. In the other room. I'll let you out and lock the door behind you."

She took a long breath. "Why would I want to go out?" she asked.

Lee's lips curled faintly. "Your boy friend is out there. With us, you're in bad company. No sense in getting yourself shot. Come on, scram!"

THERE was a crashing against the panel of the door which could only come from gun butts. Red eyed the panel without enthusiasm.

"You might get it settled and stop arguing," he said over his shoulder. "You'd better go, Linda. It'll be plenty hot in here before long."

"I'm staying here," Linda said, simply.

Lee's heart leaped wildly. But he knew it was no use. Outside she had a chance to live. Here there was none. "You're a sweet child," he said, softly. "But you're going out just the same." He put his hands on her arm, started to pull her toward the door into Scop's stateroom, but she slapped them away.

"Lee!" Scoop's voice roared through the howling of the wind. "Your last chance. Come out or we'll come in and get you."

Lee threw his arms around Linda and dragged her toward the other door. She kicked his shins, twisted out of his arms and stood away from him, breathing raggedly as she backed into a corner.

"You think I'll go out there with that—that—animal?" she panted. "He ruined my father's life! He was going to put Dad in jail if I didn't marry him—was going to lay all the blame on him even after Dad was dead! And now I know either he or Cash Childers murdered him. Dad knew too much and—"

A bullet ranged through the panel of the door. It whined across the narrow room, smacked into the heavy siding of the outer wall.

"Down!" Red said. "Get down on the floor, flat!"

He set the example by flopping on his stomach behind the desk. Lee started to drop, but Linda did not move. She was staring at him as if she had heard neither the bullet nor Red's sharp command. Lee dropped only to one knee. He twisted around, grabbed Linda's arm and jerked her toward him just as another bullet smashed through the door and buried itself in the desk which reinforced the door. The deck tilted violently just then and Linda fell headlong. She lay very still except for the movement of her slight figure with the uneven heeling of the floor beneath her. Lee had drawn his automatic. Now he shifted it to his left hand. He reached over and touched her very gently on the arm. She started and seemed to come back to the cabin from some far distance. She looked at him with the straight and level gaze of a child.

"Sorry, honey," he heard himself say. "The breaks have been tough."

Her very red lips twitched into a gallant smile but she made no answer at all. Or, if she did, he could not hear it, for at that moment a machine gun turned loose outside and began to bite a dotted line through the door.

"That tears it," Red murmured.

Savage anger raced through Lee's veins. Caught like rats in a trap, they were, and through no fault of their own.

He inched forward toward the desk, over whose uptilted top a wicked hail of bullets was ranging through that tiny cabin. He lifted his gun just above the heavy desktop, aimed at a spot just below and a little to the right of those in-bursting bullets and slammed two quick shots through the panel. There was a shrill scream which cut cleanly through the immense howling of the wind and the machine gun ceased to play its devil's tattoo against the door.

"One!" Lee said, aloud.

"There'll be two right away," Red said, crawling up beside him, "if you don't keep your dizzy head down."

Linda, her face chalky-white, scrambled to her feet and ran to the other room. Beneath the built-in bunk there were two

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large drawers. She yanked at those drawers.

In a moment her face lighted up. She pulled out a revolver which seemed too large for her to hold. Putting the gun down, she burrowed still deeper. And in a moment she came up with two boxes of cartridges.

She wheeled and started back into the office. Something caught her eye. She stopped dead and regarded the outer door with severe attention. The knob was twisting, twisting. There was no need of tiptoeing to the door. The wind was raging outside with an eerie howling that almost blanked out even the sound of firing from the next cabin. For a long instant Linda stood there at the door, her huge revolver pointed straight at the panel, a trifle to the left of that turning knob. Twice she pressed the trigger, unhooked her forefinger before the gun exploded. Then she sobbed aloud, squeezed the trigger three times, saw bright flame scorch the point on the door behind round black dots that marked the passing of the slugs. She laid her ear to the panel, heard something soft rub down on the other side of that door. She heard a dull bump as if something fairly hard had hit the panel—a head, for instance.

LEE came galloping through the other doorway, his face dead white. A crazy tilting of the deck beneath him caused him to plunge heavily against the bulkhead. He turned around, stared at Linda, who was standing rigidly at the closed door, her hand against the panel, holding her against the careening of the barge. Her eyes were closed, her long, curving lashes dark against the white skin of her cheeks.

"Get your hand away from there!" he yelled through the tumult of the wind and waves. "They'll shoot through it."

"Two," she said. "He's out there." She pointed toward the lower panel of the door. "And—and he's making a noise!"

Through a momentary lessening of the gale, Mervin listened. And from the other side of that panel he could hear a muffled screaming, a screaming which—even if it came from Cash or Scoop—tore at his heart. He hesitated a long moment. Then, swiftly, he bent over, put the muzzle of his gun close to the floor and threw two shots into the panel. The scream lifted high and was choked off. They did not hear it again.

The barge tilted to an unbelievable angle. It seemed as if all the water in the world crashed down on the upper structure. Somewhere in that chaos of noise was the sound of crashing timbers. Lee fell against the inner wall, put out his hand just in time to prevent Linda hurtling into the wall beside him. She was in his arms, then, and he could feel the beating of her heart against his chest. For the tiniest part of an instant, there in that hell of noise, of movement, of turmoil, a picture of Jennifer flashed through his memory—and faded. And somehow he knew it had forever. He put his lips fully on Linda's—held them there . . .

"If you can spare the time," Red panted, close by, "you might pay attention. They've cut out the lock in that other door, and are coming in. So's the water."

He put his shoulder against that inner door to close it, but before he could get it locked, it burst back in on him and two hurtling figures spilled into the room. Abrams and Scoop. Their mouths were open, their eyes stretched, and already they were lifting their guns for the shots that would end everything. And even in that moment of horror, Lee had time to notice that they were running through water, splashing at every step.

He heard Red's gun explode, the sound of it bouncing back and forth across the walls and ceiling of that tiny room. But Red was used to aiming quickly. Lee had no handiness with a gun. And it was too late for him to lift his, anyway. Scoop's huge body was hurtling straight at him, but the gun was coming first. The gun looked as big as a cannon and the forefinger curled around the trigger was white with strain.

Blindly Lee hurled himself at Scoop, his body lancing straight at Scoop's knees. He heard the crash of Scoop's gun, felt heat run across the back of his head. And then

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his flying body struck Scoop's knees with a crash that almost knocked the breath out of him. He hit the floor and his body slid four or five feet. An instant after he struck a tremendous weight, a living, fighting weight fell upon his back and legs.

That, he knew, would be Scoop and a moment of sheer joy came to him with the knowledge that now he and Scoop would have their final time together. Scrambling eagerly around to be at Scoop's throat, he heard, as from a very great distance, Red's voice, crisply commanding.

"Kick that gun Linda. There. Now here, quick."

Lee was face to face with Scoop, now. They were like two alley cats, on all fours, spitting and snarling at one another. Dimly Lee realized that his hands and knees were in deepening water, but that didn't matter. Nothing in the world mattered now except—this!

He threw himself forward, his fingers stretched. All he could see was Scoop's mismated eyes, one brown, one gray, and they both looked like peep holes into hell itself. His plummeting body struck Scoop, but his hands got their hold around Scoop's throat. Scoop's body turned into a wildly floundering thing. It hurled itself backward, but Lee's clinging hands pulled him along with it. Scoop was at full length on his back now, splashing in water, but Lee was atop him, riding him, sitting on his stomach forgetful of everything in the world but the pain that raced up his pressing thumbs into his hands and forearms as he dug those two thumbs deeper and deeper into Scoop's Adam's apple.

Water flowed across the room in a slick wave, washed over Scoop's purpling face, ran into his open mouth. Things were happening above Lee, and behind him, but Lee didn't care what was going on anywhere but here. He heard gunfire, a scream, and the dip of the storm, which had risen to new heights of fury. The barge was heeling and rolling like a chip in a whirlpool and the water on the floor was getting higher all the time. It had covered the purple, distorted face before him now. And the convulsive writhings of Scoop's body were lessening. In a moment it would be all over. But there was something first—

Lee snatched Scoop's face out of that water. He released the pressure on Scoop's throat. But he didn't take his hands away.

"Who killed Linda's father?" he snarled.

Scoop's body flung itself into action, but Lee's thumbs again clamped down until it seemed they must be pressing into Scoop's very backbone. In a moment the frantic thrashing of Scoop's figure ceased. Once again Lee pulled Scoop's face above water.

"Who killed him?"

"I—did!"

Lee looked up. Linda was standing over him, her gun hand limp at her side, the knuckles of her left hand pressed tightly against her vivid lips. Two bodies lay on the floor, but there was no time to look at them. Red Malloy was standing just behind Linda. In his face was no horror; he seemed mildly regretful that there should be such goings on.

"Look out!" Linda screamed. "The gun!"

Lee glanced down at the man who lay squirming beneath him in the shallow water. His right hand, groping wildly along the floor, had found the gun he had dropped when he had first charged in. Lee lunged for that gun hand. Missed it. It jammed so hard into his ribs the pain knifed all through his body. Even as Lee swept his own hand back, he knew he was too late. Instinctively he tightened his muscles against the impact of a bullet.

A gun roared in his ears. Lee waited for the pain to come. But none came. Unbelieving, he saw Scoop's face twist into a diabolic mask of pain and hatred. Scoop's body arched until it was bridging, like that of a wrestler, on his feet and neck. And then it collapsed with a splash. Lee felt himself sitting on something that was as flabby as an old bag of clothes. The tautness seeped out of Scoop's neck muscles which had been rigid in Lee's fingers. Scoop's face fell back into the rising water. Instinctively Lee lifted the man's head up. But it was no use. It sagged back. A bubble

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or two rose and broke on the surface. That was about all . . .

Red Malloy blew the gun smoke out of the muzzle of his gun.

"Five," he said, helping Marvin up.

CHAPTER XVII

CLEAN-UP

ABRAMS was in a twisted huddle on the floor by the door, Cash Childers not quite dead at the threshold. The only way they could tell he was not yet dead was by the way his mouth still jerked and by the fanatical glare of hatred in his glazing eyes.

"Oh, pick him up!" Linda sobbed when Lee and Red would have left him there. "He'll drown!"

Lee slid his arms under Cash and carried him over to Scoop's berth. Cash repaid him; he sucked his lips and spat full into Lee's face.

Marvin grabbed Linda and pushed her out of the door into knee-high water in Scoop's office.

"Looks like we might be swimming soon," Red observed, glumly.

The barge was not as wild in its motion as it had been. There was too much water in her scowlike hull. It was gushing up like a fountain through the small open hatch in Scoop's office. Seas were crashing against the deckhouse in almost constant thunder. And the barge was giving way to them loggedly, reluctantly, and taking a terrible beating in return.

"Quarter of twelve," said Red, glancing at his watch. "The storm center ought to be just about here. And then the hurricane is only half over!"

Lee put his arm around Linda. She looked as if she were walking through a nightmare, as if the cumulative horrors had long since ceased to have any meaning. Red, moving ahead, examined his gun carefully, then opened the door, whose knob and lock had been completely cut away by machine gun fire. A man lay sprawled on the other side, his body harried by wavelets which raced up and down the reeling corridor.

"Jiminez, a stakeman," Red said, stepped over the inert figure and moved aft toward the mess hall. Lee, following him, saw another body moving restlessly with the rocking of the barge. It was just outside the door of Scoop's stateroom. He hoped Linda would not notice the man she had dropped—and he had finished off. But she did, and his hand around her waist felt her tremble.

The mess hall was a place of terror, its chairs and tables smashing around into splinters with the motion of the barge, Garside's dead body floating in the water which swung back and forth, ankle-deep, across the floor and the wind screaming and shrieking around it like demons.

A shutter was broken on the port side. With every labored heave of the barge a square rush of water poured in—hundreds of gallons to every wave. And a strip of the roof had come loose and was banging like an insane kettle-drummer. Each time it lifted an inch or two it let in rain—long, slanting sheets of it. It seemed impossible that the sky could hold so much. . . .

"They're pumping somewhere aft," Red said.

Listening, Lee and Linda could hear the sound of that hand pump, thudding, thudding, patiently as the men who labored there tried to lift the entire ocean and pour it back upon itself.

SUDDENLY, with desperate hands, Linda shook Lee's arm. He turned, startled.

"I want to tell you something," she said, tightly. "Before we drown, I want to tell you. Scoop and Abrams. They got Dad drunk one time and somehow made him change the books. Then they had him. And Dad wasn't—well, he always took the easiest way."

"Forget it," Lee said, and pulled her close to kiss her.

But she fought him off. "Wait! You've got to listen. They told him they'd put him in the penitentiary for falsifying his books

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if I didn't marry Scoop. So I said I would."

"Then why," Marvin asked very gently, "did you still say you were going to marry him after your father was dead?"

"Scoop said he'd call for an accounting of the books," she said, breathlessly, "and when they found a shortage, they'd blame Dad. But he said he wouldn't if I'd marry him."

A big wave smashed against the port wall. Timbers bulged inward and there was a crackling sound that reminded Lee of Scoop's rib when it broke. Men came running forward from the storeroom, splashed through the water on the floor. Red's gun arm lifted, but there was no fight in any of them.

"There's no use pumping!" one of them squalled. "The whole house is caving in!"

"Well," Red said, with astonishing calm, "if you've got to drown, you've got to drown and the sooner you stop pumping, the sooner it'll come. In a hurry for it, son? If you are, why don't you just jump overboard?"

The panic-stricken laborer stared at him a moment, then splashed back through the water to his companions. A second later they all started aft toward the store room and soon those in the devastated mess hall could again hear the regular clanking of the pump.

"Sorry to have to fool those boys," Red said regretfully, "but they're happier thinking they're accomplishing something."

"Are—are we going to sink?" Linda cried through the tremendous sweep of the wind.

"I'm afraid we are."

Linda caught her breath. She lifted her bright head toward Marvin's battered face. "I'm—I'm glad," she said, shakily, "that I told you how it was before it was too late."

AND it was at that moment that the wind stopped. It stopped as suddenly as if it had been chopped off with a meat cleaver. So accustomed were those on the sinking barge to the immense noise of tempest that now the silence was a horrible thing. Through it the ears groped for that remembered shrilling—and what they heard was the crash of the waves and the radio. The radio was like the band at a funeral parade playing jazz instead of a dirge, shocking in its impropriety. Marvin splashed through the water and turned the thing off.

"Is the storm over?" Linda asked, her face alight.

Red looked at Lee. "You tell her," Red said. "I haven't the heart."

"Tell me what?" Linda gasped.

Lee marched back to her. "It's only half over," he said. "Exactly half over. A hurricane is like a great whirling doughnut. And this is the hole. It's a clear spot passing over us now. And the other side will hit us soon."

"How soon?" Linda gasped.

"Maybe twenty minutes, maybe an hour," Lee said grimly. "Depends how big the storm is and how fast the whole mass is moving along its course."

For an instant she hid her face in her hands. Then glancing toward that window whose shutter had been smashed in she asked quietly;

"You said a clear spot. Would there be stars?"

"I think so. Why?"

"If there are stars," she murmured, "I'd like to see them."

It was hard going across the leaping floor to the window. While there was no wind, it seemed as if some giant hand had lifted the lid from the sea and that it was dancing in ecstasy at its release. It did not appear possible that anything could live in that boiling couldron of waves, but the waterlogged barge lived, after a fashion. Seas raced and smashed aboard, from a dozen directions at once, while above, from a clear sky, stars smiled down as if there never had been a storm, nor ever would be.

Lee stood a little back from the window, his arm around Linda's slim body, steadying her against the heave of the deck beneath her feet.

"It won't be long now," Red said, gloomily, as he looked out on those raging waters. "My grandpa said never to have

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anything to do with water, never, and it looks like he was right."

"Marvin," Linda asked, suddenly, "If we—if you ever get ashore again, will you go back to the bank?"

Marvin shivered at the very thought of spending dull, quiet, endless days in the bookkeeping department, or even at the tellers' windows, which had once seemed almost the pinnacle of his ambitions.

He shook his head solemnly. "If I—we—live through this night, I'll find a construction job somewhere, even if it's only digging with a shovel. Could you put up with that until I learn something about it?"

Her hand slid over his, squeezed it tight and he felt her firm young body yield a little, toward his. But before she could answer, Red's gloomy voice broke in.

"MIGHT know a thing like this would come too late. I know a feller who gets half the big construction jobs in the South. Nice feller, too, and I've done him a couple of favors. Matter of fact, I saved his life once—mostly by accident. If you'd've promised me that you'd stop all your fighting and helling around, I could've gotten you a pretty fair job with him, I guess. Good chance for advancement, too, and"—he cocked a wise Irish eye at the two who stood there balancing against the roll of the deck—"and enough money for a couple of kids to get married on. But that's the way good things are, I guess. Always a little too late."

"Marvin!" Linda cried, her bright, fragrant hair close to his face. "We've got to live! We just have to! We have such a lot to live for!"

"Hey!" shouted Red, his voice no longer gloomy, but high and excited. "Wait till that next wave goes by. Then see if you see what I think I see!"

A rolling mountain of water raced toward the barge, lifted the heavy hull and canted it wildly. Marvin stared along the line of Red's pointing arm. His heart leaped, turned over and seemed never to settle back in its proper place. There, not half a mile away, was a light, swinging in long arcs, disappearing, reappearing in the hills and valleys of the sea.

"Look!" Red said, excitedly. "A steamer. There are its running lights. They are both there, red and green! And that means she's coming straight toward us!"

As if in answer to his cry, a great wedge of incandescent light came into being. It slanted across the raging water, groped for an instant, then focussed full on the barge.

"It must have been seeing our lights for a long time," Linda murmured in a voice that shook with happiness.

Breathlessly they stood by that window, not caring that spray from the waves whirled in and wet them to the skin, not even moving when the entire top of a wave crashed in and nearly washed them to the other side of the mess hall. They could not take their eyes away from the dark shape which presently turned into a sleek and beautiful vessel, low but seaworthy, with two stubby masts and two squat funnels. Plunging wildly through the stormy seas, she cut a great circle to leeward and began to move slowly toward the sinking barge.

"I recognized her!" Linda exulted. "She's one of the Coast Guard cutters from Miami or St. Petersburg!"

Lee drew a long and happy breath. Everything was all right now. Pretty soon they would all be safe on the cutter. He laughed drunkenly.

"On his death bed," said Red, blinking in the dazzling beam of the searchlight, "my grandpa made me promise to ride my hunches, and I said I would. The first time I saw you, Buck, you old fighting cock, you, I said to myself, 'There's a boy who's going places and—' "

But Marvin Lee was not listening. He was looking down into Linda's blue eyes and seeing in them all the things that made life worthwhile—love, adventure, a career. With that new recklessness which had become an essential part of him, he bent close to her and murmured:

"The world is ours, Linda! Let's go to town!"

THE END

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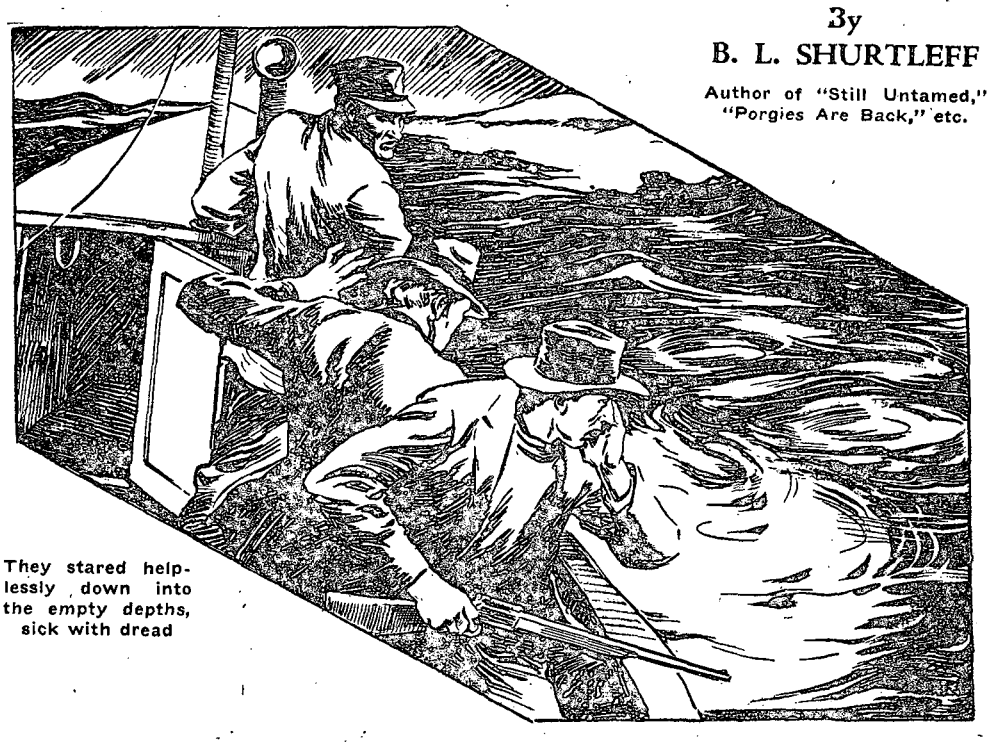
Guardian of the Gold

By
B. L. SHURTLEFF
Author of "Still Untamed," "Porgies Are Back," etc.



They stared helplessly down into the empty depths, sick with dread

THERE is no superstition stronger in Alaska than the old Siwash Indian tradition that a terrific monster guards the gold far up the reaches of the Yukon. Whenever disaster overtakes a miner or the gold on its way out, the Indians nod understandingly, for it is only another proof of the curse that hangs over those who try to take the shining metal from the region.

The Indians had much to nod about when the *River Queen* went down. Other vessels had been lost on the turbulent reaches of the long river but no other at that spot. She took on wood at Fort Yukon, yet did not reach Stevens, a little less than a hundred and fifty miles below. Since her course led through the Yukon Flats, she traveled practically all of the way through comparatively still water, with no great threat of rapids.

Furthermore, no sign of wreckage ever drifted into the ken of the hundreds of men who traveled up and down the Flats. Not a stick from her, not an oar, not a single life belt, was ever reported.

The Siwashes claimed that the *River Queen* had been seized and dragged to her fate by the Guardian of the Gold and no better explanation was ever offered. Certainly such a guardian, if any existed, would have had plenty of reason for anger against the steamer, for she carried in her massive strongroom some three million dollars worth of dust and nuggets from the rich fields up stream.

Yet no sign of the little steamer was reported in the months that followed. Scores of river men, spurred on by the knowledge of her rich cargo, had dragged and sounded and probed about in the most likely spots for disaster but every one of them hac

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quit at last to turn to some sure way of earning a living.

The incident was fast sinking into the limbo of forgotten matters when five men chugged up the reaches of the Flats in a solid launch. Overtaken by darkness they halted on one of the many islands that dot this lake-like section of the great river to pitch camp.

Their fire was barely lighted when they heard a crashing noise as of some wild animal tearing through the willows and briars.

"Bear," called Ernest Fuller, reaching for his rifle.

"More likely moose," grunted Gene Dareau.

"Neither one of 'em likely to come near a fire," sniffed old Sourdough Smith. "More likely a thievin' Indian. Them Siwash would steal your shadow or your tracks." He paused and definitely sniffed again, like a dog on scent. Then he shook his head. "Don't smell like a Siwash. Can't make out what it can be."

"Hello, anybody on this island?" called Fuller loudly, his rifle ready.

The crashing advance halted. The five crouched in readiness for friend or foe, hands going stealthily to guns.

"Who are you?" called a hollow voice that sounded eerie and mysterious.

"Five prospectors bound up river," answered Fuller. "Who're you?"

There was no answer for a full minute, during which the tenseness increased.

"Is Bill Drew with you?"

"Don't know him," called Fuller. "Never heard of him. Any of you boys know anybody called Bill Drew?"

Sourdough nodded. "Drunken fool o' that name used to hang around up river. Ain't seen him for a couple years."

The crashing renewed with the words. A bearded face peered out from the brush, the eyes gleaming in the rays of the fire like greenish red stones catching and reflecting the blaze.

"I'm Bart Wilson. Ever heard of me?"

"Sure, you old timberwolf. What'n hell're you playin' hide-an-seek about?" called Sourdough. "Gone screwy or sun'-thin'?"

Below the face appeared a ragged tatter of clothes that hung from an emaciated body. Half starved, ripped and torn by countless briars, the creature sidled slowly into the light, his great eyes wandering from face to face. Understanding seemed to come into his countenance at sight of the old-timer. Some of the terror and suspicion left him.

"Aren't you," his hand went to his forehead to push back the matted locks and hold a palm against the bulge above the deep eyes, "aren't you Sourdough Smith?"

"That's what they call me. I recollect we washed dirt together on Slave-an'-Starve Crick some four-five seasons back."

Wilson laughed and there was the high cackle of near mania in the sound. He turned, sniffing, and stared toward the fire.

"Nothin' but sow belly and sourbread, but you're welcome. Maybe some Java would go good. You look kind of ga'nted up some."

THE hands that stretched for the steaming mug were mere claws of skin over bone. Every tendon stood out in sharp relief as they clutched.

"Six days on roots and bark," he whined, thrusting his whole face at the coffee. "Starvin' to death." He lifted his ghastly eyes to the staring fire. "With millions in gold—*millions,* do you hear, right within reach."

"Drink hearty," called Sourdough, "and throw some of these solids into you. The millions'll keep."

He winked at the other four and they all nodded understandingly as the half starved man fell upon the food and wolfed it eagerly. A man who has been six days without provisions is likely to dream some very vivid dreams, especially an old prospector who has dreamed of striking it rich all his life.

Suddenly the emaciated face lifted from the pan and again the hollow eyes surveyed them with fright.

"Can any of you swim?" he asked

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sharply. "Really swim, I mean. Dive and swim underwater?"

"I'm pretty good at it," admitted Fuller.

"I've been down three minutes to a lick by the watch," volunteered Mark Gill.

"I do pretty good myself me," nodded Dareau.

"On the Clyde there wasna a mon cou'd stay langer," boasted Tom Angus, patting his great chest with a big hand.

"You c'n lie yourselves into hell and back ag'in for all o' me," growled Sourdough. "I couldn't swim a stroke if my life depended on it."

Wilson had watched them all carefully, appraisingly. His weirdly sunken eyes seemed to be peering from a great depth as they studied each of the five in turn.

"I need five honest men, some of them good swimmers, good *underwater* swimmers," said the visitor with a short laugh. "I know Sourdough Smith and I believe four men who travel with him should be honest."

"Sure," agreed Sourdough with the easy manner one adopts toward the irrational. It would do no harm to pretend to believe the hallucinations while they lasted. By morning, after a good meal and a good sleep, he would probably be rational again. If not they could drop him off at Fort Yukon and leave him for a down boat to carry to where he might be treated and brought back to normal.

"I'll pay you well," he said, taking the proffered pipe and dragging lustily at it, pausing to tamp down the tobacco with a forefinger and to peer at them again from under his bulging brow. "Say about a half million apiece, eh?"

They laughed at that, openly, joyously. Here he was without a bit of food or gear, nearly starved, probably without a cent in his pocket, and offering them a half a million each to do some diving for him. Then they all sobered and bent closer, staring at him, with his next words.

"You see, I've found the *River Queen*."

Although it was some years since the little steamer was lost and nobody searched now for her golden cargo, everybody who ever came up the Flats had the story from whoever was acting as pilot. Such is the magic of three million dollars in gold that the story would never die, even if the Guardian of the Gold had dragged it clear down to the bottom of hell as the Siwashes would have everybody believe.

"Three million dollars worth of gold," whispered Bart Wilson in that husky voice, "divided six ways means just about a half million each. That's what this meal will be worth to you, boys, this meal and a few days of poking about underwater."

AS they plied him with more tobacco and a snort or two of whisky, he told them the story. He had been stuck for a hand to help him on the run down the Flats and had taken on drunken Bill Drew. While they were gliding along Wilson had turned over the wheel to his companion, hoping to snatch a little sleep.

Instead of keeping to the center of the stream, Drew had let the craft sidle to the very bank and had amused himself by seeing how close he could cut to the overhanging willows. Then a powerful sweep of current at a sharp bend had almost dragged the boat under the overhanging bank. His startled scream had aroused Wilson just in time.

"I headed her out for midstream and give her all the gas she would take without choking," explained Wilson. "For minutes she just hung there, her stern to them drooping willows, her propeller churning. I see then that the tops of the willows was dragged right under that bank with the current.

"Well, she finally dug her toes in and pulled us out into easier water but, thinks I, there's a likely spot to look for the *River Queen*.

"We edged back, dropped an anchor, and let her stern drift almost to them willows. Then I set and watched a while. I could see the current sweepin' out only a few yards farther down and I took a chance and stripped off my clothes."

The five men still stared.

"Drew was all for stoppin' me. Cried

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like a baby and said he could never take the boat down river alone if I didn't come up. But I, like a fool, showed him the chart I'd stowed away, and told him if I didn't come out he could shift for himself. Then I ducked."

"And you found the *River Queen* under that bank?" gasped Fuller.

"I sure did, mister. Layin' there as big as life and twict as natural. I even got into her strongroom."

He went on to tell how he had found an air chamber under the bank and had dived from it to the wreck, locating the treasure room and the gold. Then he had swept out with the roiling current to carry the news to Drew.

"That fool was startin' the motor just as I came into sight. I called to him excited like, 'I've found the *River Queen*. She's under that bank.'

"Drew must've heard me, for he halted and give me a quick look. Then he reached for my rifle and swung it to his shoulder. 'You're dead, Bart Wilson,' he called. 'You ain't foolin' me, workin' for that damn monster the Injuns say keeps all the gold. You ain't draggin' me down there. Not if I know it.'

"He fired and I ducked, just before the bullet hit. I managed to get back under the bank by pullin' myself against the current on a long root. I stayed under a long time. When I come up, the boat and Drew was gone and my clothes was pitched ashore on the bank."

The five stared at him, heads shaking slightly.

"So I struck out up river. Had a tough time too. See you makin' for this island, so I swum over."

Still the five heads shook incredulously. Wilson flushed, dipped a scrawny hand into the neck of his shirt, drew out a tobacco sack. Swiftly the trembling fingers poured a big handful of gleaming yellow dust into the other shaking palm.

"Thar she is, boys. See for yourself if you want to come dive with me before that varmint Drew gets gear together and comes back and cleans her out."

Sourdough's eyes gleamed as he prodded the gold. He looked at his four comrades questioningly.

"You'll have the divin' to do," he reminded them. "So it's up to you to decide do we go prospectin' under that bank. I can't swim a lick, so it'll be your job to fetch her up. If you ain't afraid to swim right down and snatch them three millions right out of the arms, so to speak, of that Guardian of the Gold them Siwashes claims has tooken it back why—"

"Don't be a fool," laughed Fuller. "Three million dollars in gold? Say, we'd swim down to China for that, eh, boys?"

"And snatch her out of the mouth of one of them fire-spittin' dragons," grinned Dareau.

AN hour after dawn they anchored the powerful launch just beyond the willow-studded bank and edged out line, allowing the stern to drift downstream with the current. Suddenly a powerful force seemed to grip the boat by the keel and sweep her almost under the bank. The water streamed through the willows less than ten feet astern, seeming to pour into the solid earth in a mighty rush.

"Thar she is, boys," called Wilson.

The six stared, re-living the tragedy of the *River Queen's* end. Driving too close to the bank she had been seized by that sweep of water, flipped over instantly, and swung under that bank to be pinioned there with every floating stick.

"I'm going to have a look," called Fuller, slipping off his clothing.

"She's kind of skeery lookin' to me," muttered Sourdough, shuddering. "I don't feel to let you go."

"There's no danger at all," scoffed Wilson. "A man can't swim out against that current, but you don't need to. Just let it carry you along and you'll come out down yonder. We'll shove off in the small boat to pick you up and row you back aboard."

Fuller hesitated, shuddered as if with premonition. His eyes sought to penetrate those depths under that shelving bank.

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"The ship has rolled against the bank," the obliging Wilson explained. "The current hits her bottom and veers off down stream. Between the hull and the bank is calm. We'll work in that."

Fuller poised, lifted his arms above his head.

"Don't stay too long, Ernie," Sourdough begged. "I don't feel none too good about this."

Fuller shuddered and made a clean dive. His white body disappeared under those drooping willow branches, arms and legs froglike as he aided the swift current with powerful strokes.

While they waited, Sourdough let his eyes study the shore. A dense tangle of growth lifted from the very water's edge. Willows and alders were interlaced with such a mass of briars that nobody could penetrate them without slashing his way with some weapon.

"Mighty tough spot," grunted Sourdough. "Say, somebody has been along here. Look at them broken willows."

"Maybe Bart break them," shrugged Dareau, his eyes on the spot where the current swept back from its short underground trip into the main stream. "Where's Ernie? I t'ink it's time he come up."

All five of them stared toward that inrush of water. Angus was at the oars of the skiff and watching for some sign before shoving off. It would be an easy task to pick up the swimmer, head out where the current had less pull, and row back to the launch.

Seconds grew into minutes. The water rushed on silently, swiftly, greasily, but no sign of that white figure came swimming into view.

"I told him to hurry," grumbled Sourdough. "He's just stayin' there to get me scared. I don't like it."

Again silence settled over them. Something about the mighty movement of the water, the mysterious way in which it slid under those drooping willows, awed them. Again they were silent, staring.

Mark Gill was the first to move. His eyes, studying the water at the very spot where it roiled out from under the bank, had spotted something white against the dark flood. In an instant he had leaped into the stern of the small boat, nearly capsizing the startled Angus.

"Row," he called excitedly, stripping off his clothes. "Something's gone wrong. He's *floatin'* out."

It was true. The white body that came swirling and flailing into view of them all with the bubbling rise of the water was not moving with the crisp swing of life. The arms and legs were flung in lifeless gestures by the current—drooping things without impulse of their own. The head broke the surface crown uppermost and there was no effort on the part of the limp form to roll over and gasp for air before the vagaries of the current began to sweep it down again into the dark depths.

But Angus had sent the boat skimming toward the spot, nearly jerking the planking from under Gill, who was struggling to get his heavy woolen shirt off over his head. Before the white blotch far down in the dark water was utterly lost to view, big Mark Gill had gone over after it, his body knifing deep and driven deeper by those powerful strokes of the muscular legs and arms.

Again the watchers held their breaths and waited. Again there was a long pause, this time hushed with the fear that death had possibly taken a second victim under their very eyes.

THEN, far below the loitering skiff, the powerful head and shoulders of Mark Gill heaved into view, shedding water in a mighty shake as he settled down from the lift and dragged at something. It was Fuller, held securely by strong fingers locked in the long blond hair. Within half a minute they were in the skiff and Angus was swinging in a wide arc that would take him far into the stream before he fought up against the slackened current there and drifted down to the launch.

Gill hung over the limp body for a few minutes, then straightened and shook his head.

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"Dump the water—out of him," grunted Angus, putting all of his own strength into the oars. "Pump him—until he breathes. Don't—let him—die."

"Look," holding up a hand streaming crimson. "From his mouth. His ribs are crushed. He's not full of water, Tom. Something has smashed him, the way you'd smash a bug."

Aboard the launch Gill's quick autopsy was upheld by every one of the others. More than half of Fuller's ribs had been broken. His lungs were evidently forced flat, instead of being filled with water as in an ordinary drowning case. Some of the broken bones must have pierced the lungs, causing the flow of bright blood through mouth and nose.

Wonderingly they stared at the body that had been a man so few minutes before, bantering with Sourdough about an imaginary monster down there in the dusky depths.

Now every man of them realized that no sweep of that current could possibly have crushed those bones and so mangled that torso. Something other than the pressure of water had caught him, perhaps hugged him in a deadly embrace.

"Do you suppose," whispered Sourdough, "that them Siwashes is right?"

Bart Wilson shook his head, staring down into that slide where the water disappeared in a quick dive. Slowly his fingers fumbled at his own neck. He threw off his coat, pulled off his heavy shirt. Bending he started to unlace his high shoes.

"Hey, where you goin'?" demanded Sourdough.

"Down yonder. I sent him. I told him everything was all right. I'll have another look before anybody else tries it."

His body knifed into the water before anything could be done or said to stop him. He, too, swam lustily, white against the dark rush of water.

Again they waited breathlessly. Again there was a long pause while Dareau, spelling Angus at the oars, idled in the skiff.

Then Wilson swam into sight, broke water with a rush. The skiff was after him as he called. "I didn't see a thing wrong. Found the ship just as I left her."

They discussed ways and means and possibilities after Wilson was back aboard. Sourdough wanted to try to cut through the tangle on the shore and drive a shaft through the arched roof that pocketed the air above the wreck. But Wilson vetoed that. There was no knowing what effect their digging might have. The entire bank might cave in, burying the ship and making further operations impossible without professional diving gear.

"We'll rig an endless rope affair to swing buckets from the stern of the boat to the ship," suggested Wilson. "There's air enough under there to let us work. We'll duck under, carrying the line, and start diving. Soon as we have enough gold to load the bucket, we'll send it out. Three of us can dive and the other two stay aboard here to haul."

"What do you suppose happened to Ernie?" asked Sourdough.

"Maybe he tried to do some work under there," Wilson suggested. "He might have moved something, maybe a hatchcover, or something of that kind, and the current caught him behind it and crushed him. It would have a powerful pressure on a big surface, enough to cave in his ribs. We'll have to watch out."

Wilson, Angus, and Dareau lined up for the attempt. All three of them watched the water slide away under those drooping willows with doubt in their faces.

"We make for the hull and line up together where it's out of water," explained Wilson. "I'll take the line down first and you two follow it. There's a cleat I can make it fast to, so you don't need to be afraid of pulling me away. Once we're there two of us will dive at a time and feel for that strongroom. I know the way, so I'll lead. Angus can stay at the rope and call for the bucket. We'll be able to bring only a bit at a time."

Two small pails were brought for carrying the driblets of gold from the strongroom to the rail. When all was in readiness,

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the trio poised on the stern, looking from the blanket-shrouded body of Fuller back to the sliding water.

"A mighty unlucky accident," grunted Wilson. Then he took a firm hold on the rope, gulped air swiftly, and dove under the willows.

A few seconds later the two jerks on the line announced that he had made his end of the doubled rope fast to a cleat and was ready for the others to join him.

Angus drew in a great breath and plunged with a mighty splash. Hand over hand he drew himself far under the bank. A full minute later Dareau crossed himself, cast a last quick glance at Fuller's shape, and went slicing down.

THE slow minutes passed. Sourdough sat with one great hand trailing in the water grasping the doubled rope, in readiness to send down the bucket when the signal should come. Gill sat watching first the rope and then the roil of water.

Suddenly the rope began to gyrate madly. It ripped from the grip of the watching Sourdough and drew taut on the cleat to which he had fastened it. No mere signals these terrific jerks and pulls, but powerful, frantic yanks. Under the willows there appeared a fighting body that lashed about viciously as it followed gripping hands and flexing arms to drag itself from under the bank against the mighty pull of the current.

The powerful shoulders of Tom Angus fought into view and the big Scot hauled himself swiftly to the side of the launch. Eager hands lifted, but he waved them aside.

"Stand by for the others," he called excitedly. "The thing was after us. It's only by the grace of God I pulled away."

They saw his foot and ankle, the skin torn from them. Then a frantic shout down stream drew their attention. Sourdough leaped into the skiff and rowed madly toward the head and thrashing arms of Bart Wilson where he was trying to stem the current.

The skiff reached him and took him aboard, then swung about to wait for Dareau. But the French Canadian did not appear at either the rope or the swirling outlet below.

They waited until Sourdough was weary and the sun had burned high. Then Wilson reluctantly suggested that they must have missed the body as it whirled past them in the stream to carry far below.

"But what was it you found down there?" asked Gill as the four huddled at the stern staring at that thrumming rope and the sliding water.

The two survivors of that struggle looked at each other.

Angus spoke first. "It was dar-rk and I couldna see vur-ry weel. I'd made out the feel o' the rail when this mess o' feelers or some'at tangled over my arms and across my face. Like the feel o' rubber hoses or snakes, or some'at."

"It was nothing like that to me," growled Wilson. "It was a big shape rubbed against me, slimy and oily and soft. When I kicked out at it, I fetched against something as hard as bone, for I near smashed my toe."

Sourdough shook his head, plainly puzzled.

"I never heard them Siwashes say what this fool Guardian of the Gold looks like," he mused, "but it must be what you found. I guess them three millions can stay there."

"Look!" screamed Gill. "The rope!"

They stared incredulously. The rope had jerked spasmodically and now seemed to be drawn down by a greater force than the pull of the current.

"Get a rifle," called Sourdough. "It's comin' up."

Angus grabbed a weapon from the cabin and stood in readiness to fire at the first appearance of the horror that lurked down there in the darkness. The others watched silently. The rope remained in that same strained position, with the water thrumming over it with a different tune since the change.

"Pull it up," said Sourdough.

"It's fast," Wilson insisted. "I caught it around that cleat."

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"It gives," said Sourdough, pulling lustily.

Other hands reached to help. The rope came up with a sag and a drag that indicated it was loaded. While the other three pulled, Angus stood in readiness to fire into whatever fiendish thing might be at the end of that line.

"Let her have it, boys. Let's bring it aboard."

SOMETHING surged out from under the willows with a mighty rush as the streaming water broke around it. Angus lifted his gun to fire, then lowered it with a gasp. Caught in the look of the rope, dragging limply in the water, was Gene Dareau.

Four white and shaken men took him aboard, staring at the pitiful body. He, too, had been crushed by some powerful force, perhaps by the embrace of those snakelike feelers that had looped about Angus.

"The thing's devilish," chattered Wilson, his teeth rattling like castinets. "It's ghastly. Can there be anything to that old Siwash idea?"

"It got Fuller and now Dareau," muttered Gill, staring at the French Canadian's deflated chest. "It's some monster from hell, boys. It'll get the rest of us if we stay. I'm for pullin' out of here."

"Thr-ree million dollars," sighed Angus, shaking his head sadly.

Bart Wilson swung to face them. His teeth were clamped shut to stop their chattering and his eyes blazed.

"Listen, boys, the thing's alive. We know that. We fought it. I don't know what it is, but it's alive. We can lick it. We've got to lick it. Not just for the three million in gold that's down there, but because it has killed two of our pals. Not even a damned Siwash god can get away with that."

"But how con a mon fight a thing like thot?" inquired Angus, his broad brogue rolling out in his excitement.

"There'll be some way to do it. We can't just quit. Have you dynamite aboard?"

"I have. A full box."

"I killed fish with the stuff when I was a kid. Enough of it exploded under water will kill anything, or stun it enough so that it's an easy job to finish the killing. Let's try that."

The question of how much dynamite to use was a ticklish one. Enough to insure the death of that unknown monster lurking there might tumble the overhanging bank upon the wreckage, burying the gold hopelessly. There was no knowing what the action of the current might be then. It might pile tons of material on top, or sweep away the fall and the ship as well in deeper water where they might never recover it.

"Three sticks?" asked Wilson.

They nodded agreement and three sticks of the dynamite were swiftly wrapped together into a neat bundle. Ready hands prepared the package. A match was applied, the fuse allowed to burn just the right length, and then the bundle was hurled into the water. It landed just outside the willows, disappeared with a rush under the bank.

Four seconds later there was the boom of a muffled explosion far under water. The bank lifted and swayed back into the water. The willows and briars thrashed and jerked. But the roots of that dense growth must have made a veritable mat over that cavern. Although the bank continued to sway and the willows to dip for some minutes, nothing slumped into the current except, as the earth in the rush below indicated, a bit of loose earth which the current bore away.

"Going down," called Wilson grimly, poising on the rail.

"Take this," urged Sourdough, thrusting a knife into his hand. "In case it ain't dead, give it the cold steel."

He nodded, closed eager fingers over the handle, took a deep breath, shuddered and was gone.

"He's a br-rave mon," grunted Angus. "I'd no like to be doin' thot the noo."

Another of those ghastly waits followed. The three could only wonder what that

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diving figure had encountered far under the earth in those black cavernous depths. Meanwhile they watched for some sign of either their companion or the monster to come floating out down at the spot where the water spewed into the river again.

For a long time nothing appeared. They eyed each other anxiously.

FINALLY Gill cleared his throat. "I'm game to go look, if you think it's the right thing to do," he offered.

At that instant, before their decision could be made, there was a surge and a splutter from down stream and Bart Wilson appeared on the surface, grinning.

"We must of killed it," he called happily. "Never found a sign of it."

They rowed him back to the boat and ate lunch while the men who had been in the water chafed and slapped their flesh until it glowed with warmth again.

"I'm for buryin' our dead and puttin' off any more divin' until tomorrer," said Sourdough. "You boys're tuckered out."

The suggestion met with approval and they rowed ashore with the two bodies, leaving Wilson and Sourdough aboard. Since the boat was heavily laden on the shoreward trip and would be lighter when returning, they dropped down with the current, planning to land and bury their dead before rowing up against the stream.

"Anything look queer to you yonder?" asked Gill, jerking his head toward the shore of a little cove as they nosed the boat into the bank and started to step ashore.

Angus stared for a full minute at the tangle. There were briars stretched across in a thin veil but there was something artificial about their lacing. Beyond stretched a long narrow cove.

The Scot nodded. It was plainly evident that some other agency than nature had draped those loops of briar.

"Game to row up there a way?"

Again Angus nodded. Hurriedly they scooped out a wide shallow grave for the two bodies, covered them reverently, then piled the mound high with stones against marauding animals. With grim faces they headed toward the thin briar barrier.

Gill was at the oars and Angus was studying the stretch of water ahead. Both of them were startled by the gruff voice that bellowed at them. Turning, they saw a big man lifting from a cover that looked for all the world like a ducking blind. He had a double-barreled shotgun in his hands and the barrels covered the boat.

"Get out o' here. We want no claim jumpers in this creek," the man roared.

His bloated face, plainly the worse for years of heavy drinking, was contorted with vicious anger. There was no doubt that he was determined to fire if they continued.

"Thanks for the welcome," snapped Gill. "If I was goin' your way I'd—"

He swung the boat from the cove and rowed back toward the launch.

"Did you note the finger missin' on the left hand?" asked Angus.

"I didn't, but that'll be enough for Sourdough to identify the surly beast. He'll know him if he belongs on the Yukon."

Both Sourdough and Wilson were interested at the mention of that mising finger.

"So Bill Drew didn't get very far down stream," grunted the latter. "Hauled in there to finish what liquor and grub there was aboard, eh? Well, I'll settle matters with him, boys, after we get that gold. I'll show him what he might have shared if he'd done what was right."

They rested during the afternoon and evening, slept soundly that night, taking turns at watching. Then, as the sun lifted above the willows, they made ready to go down again.

Gill, thoughtful since seeing Drew, touched Wilson's arm as the latter poised to dive.

"Suppose we try another charge of dynamite?" he suggested. "Just in case that thing was stunned and has come around since."

Wilson laughed and shrugged.

"I don't think there'll be any need of that. I'm going to have a look around down there."

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He exposed a waterproof matchbox gripped in one hand. Then he tightened his fingers, arched into the water, and swiftly slid from view. Again they knew that horror of waiting.

Suddenly Tom Angus moaned and pointed. They all followed the line of that extended arm. There was no white body drifting out with the current below where the water returned to the stream, but there was something equally horrible. The water itself was dyed crimson where it left the bank, bending with the main river and thinning to a fainter and fainter red as it swirled away. A single burned match stick loitered for an instant within their range before it too swirled off in the current.

MARK GILL screamed with anger at sight of that spreading flow of red. With a dive he ducked into the cabin and came out with something he had been preparing while the others were on deck. In one hand he held a many pronged grapnel, its sharp tines filed to needle points, a rope trailing from the short shank.

"Stand by to haul this," he called, kicking off his heavy pants and jerking off his shirt.

"Don't, Gill, it's suicide," moaned Sourdough.

"It'll only get you, too, laddie," Angus said.

Gill stood bare and gleaming. In one hand he gripped the short shank of the grapnel, in the other a sharp knife. "Pull for all you're worth, after I've been gone two minutes," he called and plunged into the dark depths.

Brooding over the nature of that unknown monster during the long hours of the night, Mark Gill had hit upon the only possible explanation that he could harbor and remain sane. The thing answered in some measure the description of a giant octopus. Had this been tropical salt water instead of sub-Arctic and fresh, he might have believed that those ropy feelers were tentacles, that slimy body the repulsive torso, that hard thing against which one of them had kicked—the vicious parrot-like beak of the loathsome underwater menace of the tropics. But this could be none of these.

Sitting on the launch, staring at that tangle of willows and briars and the sharp cliff that rose immediately behind them, he had made a wild guess and was going to risk his life to prove it. Like the reports of the three blind men who "saw" the elephant, the bits of information were conflicting and misleading, but he felt that he might have hit upon the solution. One thing and one only bothered him, but he was determined to know or to die trying to.

The icy water shocked and numbed him. The drag of the violent current terrified him. As he thrust his head beneath the edge of the bank he was almost certain that there was a dull glow emanating from somewhere ahead of him, but it changed suddenly to pitch blackness.

He smashed against the hull of that submerged wreck with such force that the wind was all but driven from his body. With the grapnel and the knife handicapping him, he groped toward the rail. The slack of the rope was seized by the current and the grapnel almost torn from his hand, but he reached high up that rounded hull and stuck the grapnel prongs into the water-soaked woods. With a mighty heave he drew himself half out of water, to gasp eagerly in the air pocket. A cool breeze struck his face, startling him. He had a feeling that he was not alone in the cavern.

Something slid into the water near him as he sat astride the rail. He thought he heard a slight hissing noise like the breaking of tiny air bubbles in the following silence of that subterranean vault. Then something very like the sinuous body of an elongated eel slid across his face and arms and he felt a gripping limb of some kind wrap about his ankle and draw him underwater.

Viciously he slashed with the keen knife. The gliding things about his face and shoulders were caught against the water-logged hull and sliced easily. There was a sudden hissing like the angry warning of a giant snake and great bubbles welled up

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past him as he slid from his perch in response to that suddenly frantic yanking on his ankle.

As he slid down a great bulk caught him and pinioned him against the hull. Mighty tentacles of some kind wrapped about his body in a mighty embrace. He felt that gross slippery body against his bare flesh, dragging him down, down . . .

Panic seized him for an instant as those powerful arms forced the air from him and his head went under. He forgot knife and grapnel, thought only of those others who had died down in that black hole in the grip of this fiendish monster.

He knew that his ribs were near to breaking. The air was fighting to get from his throat, where muscles constricted to hold it in check. Brutally that weight crushed against him, held hard by the drive of the current which had caught the two bodies against the keel of the little steamer.

REMEMBERING his knife at last, he stabbed viciously, only to feel the blade veer aside with a rasp. But that rasp gave him courage. It was no bone or parrot-like beak that he had struck but the harsh clang of metal. He had been right!

The knife ripped again and again. The force of his arm against the resistance of the water would have driven him from his target but that crushing embrace held them together. The resistance did hamper his drive but did not prevent him from sinking that blade deep again and again into that softer mass below the hard metal top. Then, as great arms about him began to relax, he drove the sharp prongs of the grapnel into the yielding body, kicked viciously to drive the mass from him, and shot up to refill his bursting lungs with air. Then he ducked under again, seized the rope, and drew himself back toward the boat, fighting the drag of the current with his powerful arms.

"Quick," he called as they hauled him aboard, "pull in that grapnel. I got him. He's hooked."

All three heaved on the line. Something bulky seemed to fight against them, dangling and swaying in the rush of the current as they put all of their strength into the haul.

"It's hangin' onto something," moaned Sourdough. "I reckon we're fast to the *River Queen* herself."

"It's deader'n salted sowbelly," grunted Gill, "but big. The current gets a grand pull at it. Come on! Let's give it to her!"

Something huge and gray and wobbly slid into view under the willows. For an instant they stared incredulously at the thing, then recognition dawned. It was the body of a mighty man, a veritable giant, encased in a rubber diving suit. His mighty arms, flopping now in the rush of the water, were thick and powerful enough to have crushed those ribs. His trailing hose line and life line, severed by Gill's knife at the start of the fight, told the story of the tentacles. The huge size of the man accounted for the misunderstanding about the bulk of the unknown terror.

Suddenly the bang of a motor sounded down stream as they heaved the sodden body inboard.

"Get going," called Gill, leaping forward. "That'll be Drew makin' a dash for it. He must have picked the diver up at Stevens or met him coming up the river. They was tryin' to get the gold."

"And they seen the boys comin' down, so they snaggled 'em, to keep from havin' to split the gold," nodded Sourdough.

"But I dinna see how they wor-rked the thing yet," protested Angus over the pop and roar of their motor as they swung into chase. "A mon canna go doon in one o' them wi'out a pump and tenders."

Sourdough grunted. "I should 've guessed, when I heard Drew was in that crick. That'll be Flat Crick, where the Leader boys worked out a vein o' quartz back in 1897. The hole where the wreck's layin' must be where the Yukon busted into their main shaft. There'll be a lead into that above the water where they worked."

Gill, who had taken in the anchor and was now looking at the rifles, nodded agreement. But there would be time enough for investigating all that after they had run

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those aides of the murdering diver to earth.

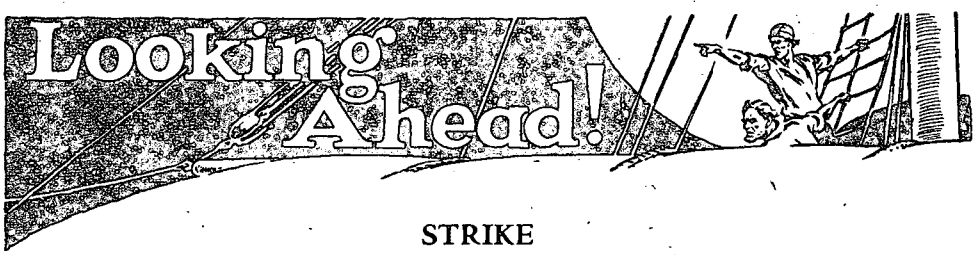
Inside of three minutes they saw the slower Wilson boat with a frightened Drew and two others in the cockpit. She was panging madly down stream, with Drew waving a rifle defiantly as he steered with one hand.

Gill laughed and whipped up his own rifle. A bullet sang over the heads of the fleeing men. The two other dived for the cabin, but Drew turned and swung his gun to his shoulder. Even as he fired, the old boat veered. In another instant, before he could grasp the wheel and head her back to course, she had smacked into a rock. Instantly she heeled, staggered, flipped over in a quick jerk.

For a mad instant heads and hands were visible above the water, then they were gone. The boat, her bow smashed, filled slowly and went careening off underwater, her wake strewn with minor bits of wreckage. But there was no further sign of the passengers or the defiant Drew. Although the launch remained near the spot for an hour searching for survivors, there was no sign of the trio.

"Now we'll have plenty of time to get ourselves an honest diver, find that back entrance where that fellow came down to the wreckage from that mine, and salvage the rest of the three millions," nodded Gill. "It's too bad the others won't be around to share it with us, especially poor Wilson."

"Guardian of the Gold," snorted Sourdough, shaking his head. "Say, if there is anything to that old Siwash story it ain't no Injun devil what guards the gold of this here river. If you ask me, it's a mighty smart rooster we was lucky enough to take into partnership with us, a tenderfoot that's fast turnin' into a real old sourdough himself, one Mark Gill."



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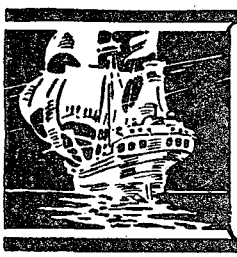

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

ONCE more life has struck us a mortal blow right in the center of our naïvete. Our sensations at the moment resemble those of a friend of ours who recently spent a weekend at the home of a friend of *his*. His friend, it seems, had a bathtub, but no shower; so our friend labored all afternoon rigging one up for him. Along about six when our friend decided to cool off and christen the new bathing arrangements, the bathtub—he swears this is true—waited until the moment when he was turning on the water, and then bit him.

Whether that antic incident ever took place or not, we know just how our man felt. We're having Leo Lawson Rogers trouble, a malignant complaint to which those of trusting hearts are peculiarly susceptible.

Leo Lawson R., be it said, is the pleasantly demented fellow who puts up at this office whenever he's in town. He has bright red hair, an engaging if somewhat badly proportioned grin, and—his most fascinating feature—one bright blue and one soft brown eye. He is well over six feet six, thinner than the office boy's excuse for being late, and, apparently entirely boneless. He claims Williwaw, Nebraska, for his birthplace, has been wed a regrettable number of times and is somewhat deviously descended from Tyl Eulenspiegl.

We've always been rather fond of Leo Lawson. When he comes to sleep in the office, he just coils around the heating system and suspends animation in a way that no one could find offensive. He feeds and bathes the pixies who have the same sort of affection for him that the Quintuplets must feel for Doctor Dafoe. He has, as you have already heard, endowed the Leo Lawson Rogers Memorial Prize for the worst short-story of the year. In fact, he's quite a fixture around the place.

Accustomed to his geographical vagaries, his recent long disappearance hasn't greatly worried us. But the other day we had a letter from him—postmarked Pongomongo (there's no extradition from Pongomongo; we looked it up). Enclosed was a postage stamp alleged to be lethal, with two clues attached, consisting of one bright red hair and one rather dirty fingerprint. The letter, apparently, has to do with the story, *Reader I Killed Him,* which we published in the May 29th issue and dedicated to Leo Lawson. We couldn't think of anything to do with it but reprint it in full. Let it be a lesson to all of you.

DEAR EDITOR:

They have sent Charles Edward Stinton to the chair for murdering his partner, Hugo Lance, even though as Stinton said, they got the wrong man. What's more, they knew they had the wrong man, but they didn't much care. They should have listened to Stinton. His reasoning was wrong. But his answers were right. I murdered Hugo Lance.

I'm a detective story writer, one of the best though I've sold only one story. You know me. You've even rejected some of my stories and thus have lost a lot of possible circulation. At first I thought that you just didn't appreciate good fiction. But recently I've found out the facts of the case. You editors buy only from other editors who buy stories you write under assumed names. Or you buy stories from people who give you a cut in on the price. I know that is so or you would have bought the stories I sent to you instead of buying stories from Sinclair Gluck and George Challis and Dale Clark, all of which are obviously pseudonyms. It was when I realized this that I set out to murder Hugo Lance and Charles Edward Stinton.

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They rejected one story after another of mine, stories that would undoubtedly have put over Dame Detective. They sent me nasty little pink slips instead of writing decent letters. I struggled along with them for a long time. Then finally a scheme occurred to me. I would read all the other magazines, pick out the best story I could find, copy it off, and see if they would buy it. If they didn't buy it that would prove my contention. If they did take the story under my name I knew they would do so just to expose me as a plaguerist (sic) so as to put all us free-lance authors in a bad light and open the way for more of this swapping of editors' yarns. But I had to play into their hands at first to raise some cash.

So I copied that story off, sent it in from Arizona. I was not at all surprised to receive the check. Immediately I cashed it and came to New York, leaving no forwarding address so that they could not find me.

Then began a period of waiting. I changed my name to Lovan Bloom and went down to see Stinton. I happened to arrive at the office just as he and Lance were wrangling over finances and heard the whole story through a thin partition. When Stinton finally let me come in to talk with him, I could see him muttering under his breath. He was in a killing mood. And that just fitted in with my plans. I knew then that if Hugh Lance died under suspicious circumstances, Stinton would be blamed for it and they would hang it on him if they could. So, pretending I was going to write a story for *Dame Detective,* I left the office, went to a Schraffts across the street and watched for Stinton to come out. I followed him to a drugstore where he bought the toothpaste. Knowing then that my plan was working fine I went home to polish up on the last details.

Stinton was a skunk and unimaginative like all editors. I knew that, and I also knew that he was planning to murder Lance and was planning to do it in the method described in that story. But I was afraid it would not work. And by then I was desperate: I had to have my revenge. It had become the main aim of my life. I had to avenge also all the other authors who were suffering under the diabolical purchasing methods of the editors. I had decided then to murder all these double-crossing racketeers. And to make them pay my expenses while I plotted their deaths.

So I wrote a letter to Lance demanding an immediate answer and signed it with the name of an old friend of his. I put it in an addressed envelope. But I did not fasten the stamp down. I carefully put poison on the back of the stamp, a potent poison of my own invention.

Lance licked the stamp, went home and died. He hadn't used the toothbrush that Stinton left poisoned because it was a pink toothbrush and he ordinarily used a green one and must have suspected something. That's where Stinton figured wrong. Stinton was color-blind.

But Lance died anyway and the cops hung the murder on Stinton even though they knew he didn't murder Lance. Their laboratory tests proved that the brush had never been used. The capsule was found under the bathtub where it fell when Lance died. But they had to send somebody to the chair. And they sent Stinton.

So you see how it is. I'm all set now. When I send out a story I poison the stamps. If the story is rejected the editor dies. If the story is bought I'm in that much dough. If the editor dies the mailman has by then removed all the evidence and they can't possibly catch me. It is a very smart scheme that only an author such as I could figure out.

I am sending you a story tomorrow. It is a detective story. But you won't know which one. I am not using the name of Lovan Bloom any more. Or my own name. You will probably get a hundred stories. But you better buy mine.

LEO LAWSON ROGERS.

Pongomongo Island

Well, that's how it is. Fancy that nice Rogers boy turning out to be a murderer. And we're sure we don't know how Mr. Dale Clark is going to take to all that tampering with a homicide that he undoubtedly considers entirely his own property.

Leaving aside the macabre and homicidal for the moment, we pause to take a small bow for the new covers. We're mighty proud you like them, suh, even if it still does give us a small shock to see the book on the newsstands without its red band.

The letter below, with which we close today's discussion, is typical of many we've received since making the change, so let's give ear to the gentleman from Brooklyn:

NORMAN FREWIN

I am an ARGOSY reader who has read your magazine for about three years now.

In all that time I have seen many excellent covers on the magazine, but I must say that I have never seen a more beautiful cover than the one on the June fifth issue, featuring the story, "The Yardarm Swing," by H. Bedford Jones.

Brooklyn, N. Y.

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Made especially for home use, attached in a jiffy without tools. **Not a toy.** Put on your own programs at home, parties, club affairs, etc. Barrels of fun! Easy to operate.

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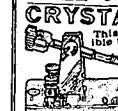

This is a radio in itself as it is possible to get receiving with it alone within 25 miles of a station for up to 100 miles under good conditions. All you need is an aerial & ear phone. Completely assembled & wired with supersensitive crystal, stand, base, coil, arm with cat's whisker, etc. Reception guaranteed. 25c

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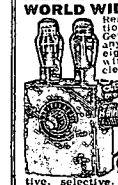

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ONE TUBE SET. Good headphone volume. Complete Kit **$1.55**

SUPER ONE TUBE BATTERY SET. Gives better volume & reception. Complete Kit $2.00 Wired, ready to operate $2.30.

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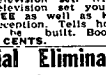
Radio & Television Book

How to build inexpensive crystal sets, electric radio, short wave radio, hints on building television set. With a television set you can SEE as well as HEAR reception. Tells how a simple home set is built. Book of many etc. **ONLY 10 CENTS.**

Noise & Aerial Eliminator



Eliminates aerial and filters electrical disturbances. Increases the reception from radio and makes greater distance and volume possible. Guaranteed. Price Postpaid 50 Cents.

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Smart, snappy. Just what every real boy is wearing. Cool and comfortable. **White Twill Yacht Cap,** with black oilcloth visor, sweat band, gold braid and brass buttons with anchor. Price **25c**

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Adds, subtracts, multiplies, divides. Does work of a costly machine. Ten million capacity. Simple and accurate. **NOT A TOY.** No keys to operate. No lever to push, no lever to pull. Total always visible. Guaranteed for years. Lightning calculator and time saver. Constructed of steel insuring strength, durability and reliability. Lasts a lifetime. Compact and light. Weighs 7 oz. Will slip right in vest pocket, and can be carried about without inconvenience. Safety. Price **$1.50**

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Contains material all ready cut and instructions to assemble these moccasins —comfortable slippers that are swell for wearing around the house on cold nights, or even running around outside. Durable suede. Fun to make. State size. Price **$1**

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OVER 101 ILLUSTRATIONS

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PRICE 25c

Why envy these easy rhythm, and fascinating grace of Step'n Fetchit, Fred Astaire etc. Tap dance in ONLY 6 HOURS by a new simplified course by Prof. Wilson. No special ability needed. Be smart! Everybody's tapping. The whole town is tapping. Beat out a tune with your feet.

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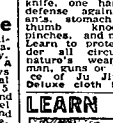

See how easily you can master the secrets of Hypnotism and strange power. Sway others at will. Influence the thoughts of others. Control their desires; and be the master of every situation. Develop the will power, banish fear and worry, improve your memory, overcome bad habits, etc. Price **25c**

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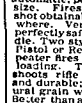
Shoots B. B. Shots

STAGE MONEY



With a bunch of these bills, it is easy for a person of limited means to appear prosperous by flashing a roll of these bills at the proper time and peeling off a genuine bill or two from the outside of the roll. The effect created will be found to be all that can be desired. Prices: 40 bills 20c, 120 for 50c, or $3.50 per thousand postpaid.

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into a trunk, under the bed or anywhere. Lots of fun fooling teacher, policeman or friends.

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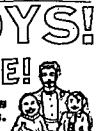
a little instrument, fits in the mouth out of sight, used with above for Bird Calls, etc. Anyone can use it. Never fails. A complete book with full course on Ventriloquism together with the Ventrilo. Sent postpaid for only.....



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Electrite Pencil writes in gold, silver, red, yellow, purple, green or blue. Writes on wood, paper, hakelite, celluophane, silk, rubber, etc. Engrave your name, monogram or initials in gold or any other color on your car, wallet, fishing tackle, golf clubs, jewelry, etc. Print and decorate anything. Use where boys and girls can earn extra cash easily by doing this for other people. Every time you engrave a name or monogram on an article you can easily get 25c for it, it's such a most nothing except few seconds time! Easy to use. Just plug in el. ectric current and the pencil point is ready to write. **ELECTRITE** has NICKEL anode supplied for writing 6 colors. Only $1.00

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Large size, nicely printed with seal suitable for framing. Hand one of these to your friend and he will never forget you! Several choices: Liars License; Bootleggers Diploma; Marriage Certificate (it looks real); Liar's & grafter's Certificate; Gossiper's Certificate; Spanish Athletes (Bull Throwers) Certificate; Gold Diggers & Grafters Certificate; Ice Arrest Drivers & Skaters Certificate; Death Certificate; Birth Certificate; Arrest Warrant; College Diploma; Dog License Stock, Gold Mine, etc.; Divorce Certificate; Air Pilot's License; Doctor's Certificate. Only 10c each, 3 for 25c.

CCC RING

Everyone wants to wear this big ring with the red, blue and gold emblem surrounded by the American Eagle! Handsomely polished. State size. Nerve appearance **25c** Price only Sterling Silver Ring, only $1.00.

U.S. NAVY RING Similar to the CCC ring, only with Navy Emblem. USN in bold relief with anchor. Silver appearance, 25c. Sterling Silver, $1.00. 14 kt Gold with Sterling Emblem, $1.75

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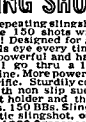
Open Any Lock



Did you ever lose or forget your keys? Probably many times. Don't worry any more about lost keys. (or anything that matter), as these master keys will open almost any ordinary lock. Five different keys for various types of locks. Will save their cost if you only use them once, but you'll probably find them so handy that you'll always carry them.

5 MASTER KEYS Price 25c

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Automatic repeating slingshot that will fire 150 shots with one loading! Designed for accuracy. Bills eye every time. Extremely powerful and hard hitting—will carry a 100 page magazine. More powerful than an air rifle. Sturdily constructed with non-rip suede leather shot holder and thick rubber bands, 150 lbs. Sling, the automatic slingshot, only 25c. Tube of 200 Copper coated BB's, 40c. Bell ringing Target, 30c.

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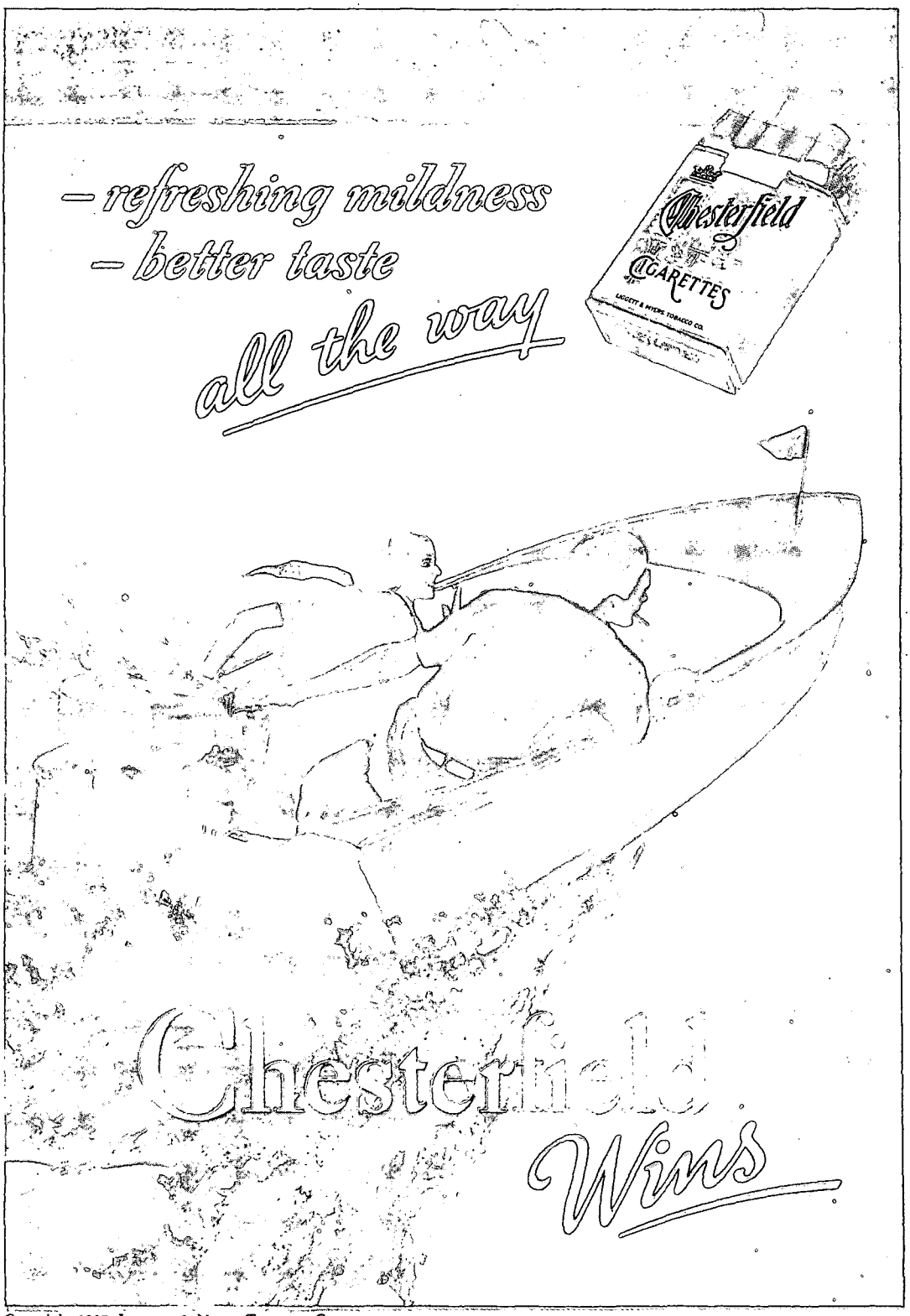

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